Nuestros Hijos van a la Universidad [Our Sons and Daughters Are Going to College]: Latina Parents' Perceptions and Experiences Related to Building College Readiness, College Knowledge, and College Access for Their Children—A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Data from a focus group of nine Latina parents, specifically mothers from a South Texas border region known as the Rio Grande Valley, were analyzed using a qualitative methodology. Grounded in the theory of social capital, the purpose of the study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of Latina parents related to accessing information and resources to aid their students in enrolling in postsecondary institutions. The study was an exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative one that used a naturalistic paradigm. Findings showed that Latina parents perceived gaining information and resources related to increasing their understanding of college readiness, college knowledge, and college access as challenging. In addition, findings

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indicate that despite challenges, the mothers did receive support along the way. As parents, they want to get their students not only to the college door but through the college door, declaring that their children will go to college. They recognize there are keys to helping guarantee access to college, and it is these keys that these mothers seek. Such findings are important because the national portrait of college enrollment and attainment of college degrees shows continuing inequalities based on class, race/ethnicity, and income, especially for Latina/o first-generation students. Yet, few studies have considered the perceptions and experiences of Latina/o parents related to accessing information and resources to support their students when preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in postsecondary institutions.

Resumen

Información obtenida en un grupo de enfoque constituido por nueve padres de jóvenes latinas universitarias aspirantes del sur de Texas fue analizada cualitativamente. Los padres latinos percibieron retadores el obtener información y recursos relacionados para entender la preparación universitaria, así como el conocimiento y el acceso, pero también reportaron haber recibido apoyo. Dichos hallazgos son importantes porque el retrato nacional de admisión y obtención de grados universitarios muestra desigualdades basadas en clase, raza/etnia, e ingreso, especialmente en estudiantes de primera generación latina/os.

Introduction

Temperatures were soaring above 90 degrees. Yet, it was barely 9 a.m. on a Monday morning in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of Texas. Despite the oppressive heat, a circle of mothers had gathered in a Texas–Mexico border town in the *colonias* to sit outside for an hour to learn how they could help their sons and daughters enroll in college.

As the presentation began, the main facilitator, speaking in Spanish, invited the women to introduce themselves and tell the ages of their children. Many of the facilitators and researchers attending the presentation assumed the women's children would be at least high school age. Yet, the first mother to introduce herself explained she was there to acquire information to one day get her daughter admitted to college. As she spoke, she lovingly gestured to the toddler sitting in her lap. She was not there to participate in a focus group. Rather, she was there to hear the presentation. Years in advance of when her daughter would go to college, she made it clear she was there for the sake of her 3-year-old daughter. She explained that she wanted her daughter to avoid the difficulties she had encountered, and she planned to support her daughter in any way possible. For this mother, and all the mothers sitting in the circle, it was not a

question of whether their sons and daughters would go to college. It was a declarative statement, "Nuestros hijos van a la universidad" [Our children are going to college].

In too many instances, one hears the story of how parents, especially parents of first-generation Latina/o, African American, or Native American youth, lack involvement, the story of how students need to overcome barriers, the story of insufficient academic preparation, the story of lack of college knowledge, and lack of funds. It is a telling, again and again, of how parents and students need to make up for this "lack." It is, unfortunately, a story based on a deficit model, a model where the onus is placed on the students and their parents to become "equipped" with cultural and social capital and cultural integrity. It is a model that prescribes assimilation into mainstream ideals, rather than holding accountable the schools and groups that possess the capital to become more culturally responsive and culturally responsible. An assumed deficit model, warn Tierney and Hagedorn (2002), is potentially a warmed-over culture-of-poverty framework resulting in status quo practices that limit the possibilities of first-generation African American, Latina/o, and Native American youth.

The access-to-college literature is filled with stories that uphold the status quo, whether intentionally or not, and allow for present practices that neither provide a solution nor eradicate the problem of the academic divide. Hopefully, this study is not a part of that story. Instead, this is the story of a group of researchers from a large Central Texas research university partnering with members of a non-profit group devoted to opening doors to college and working not only with parents, but also with the families of Latina/o students to help with academic socialization by building college awareness, providing college exposure, and ultimately extending access to college. It is the story of a group of individuals working with families in culturally responsive and culturally responsible ways. Most important, this is the story of nine Latina mothers who are not asking, "Will our sons or daughters go to college?" but proudly declaring their students will enroll in, attend, and graduate from college—"Nuestros hijos van a la universidad."

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of Latina parents related to accessing information and resources to aid their students in enrolling in postsecondary institutions. Despite the research indicating parents are one of the most salient influencers informing students' educational aspirations (Auerbach, 2002; Dearing, Krieder, & Weiss, 2008; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Spoth, Randall, & Shin, 2008), very little research (Cortez, Martinez, & Sáenz, 2014; Engaging Communities for College Readiness, 2008; Johnson, 2009) has focused on the perceptions of parents, in particular Latina mothers, and their experiences with accessing resources and information to help navigate the process of their students' application and enrollment in postsecondary institutions. To help fill this gap in the literature, this study sought to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences among the participants regarding what they know and what they need to know about college readiness, college knowledge, and college access.

In this study, *college readiness* was defined as the combination of skills, knowledge, and habits of thought necessary to be successful in college-level courses. *College knowledge* was defined as learning what colleges look for in a student, along with obtaining the knowledge about the different types of colleges and how and when students should to apply to college. Finally, *college access* was defined as a way of encouraging and preparing students for higher education that focuses on a range of college-related skills.

A large central Texas research university in partnership with a non-profit Family Engagement Initiative, and in collaboration with the Independent School District (ISD) of a South Texas border region known as the RGV, engaged in a qualitative research study to address the purpose of this research project. This particular focus group study, part of a larger federally funded grant project, was one of five focus groups in which five populations were interviewed—Latina parents, Latina/o high school students, family engagement specialists (FES), high school counselors, and currently enrolled Latina/o college students—as a part of preliminary research conducted to aid in the design and development of the larger research project. The larger study is a mixed-method study designed to test the effectiveness of a curriculum for families to provide support in enrolling their students in college. This article is concerned solely with the focus group study of the Latina parents.

Review of the Literature

The study was grounded in the theory of social capital (Crosnoe, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005) in an effort to understand how forms of social capital enhance the academic and social experience of how parents of Latina/o students gather and receive information related to college readiness, college knowledge, and college access. The primary idea behind social capital—access to important social networks—is that social networks have value. "Social networks," or who people know and the channels of information, depend on social capital norms of reciprocity: "I do for you; you do for me. We add value to one another." In the present context, the social capital theory recognizes that it is access to the networks and individuals within networks of information that promote access to college. Information flow, for instance, learning college knowledge—how to apply to college, when to apply, where to apply—depends on social networks, and the knowledge that comes from belonging to these networks provides value or "capital" to the people who are connected.

Administrators, teachers, and staff involved in college preparation programs, as well as researchers, scholars, and policy analysts, generally agree that "parental involvement" is a component of successful college-access programs. In fact, some research suggests that parental support, motivation, and encouragement may be the most significant predictor in whether students enroll in postsecondary education (Cotton, 2000; Desforges, 2003; Epstein, 1995; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Jun & Colyar, 2002; Tinkler, 2002).

The researchers of this study moved away from using the term *parental involvement* and its pejorative connotation that parents are not involved but need to be, and

instead focused on the idea of *working with parents*. Based on the results of extensive research in developmental psychology and other disciplines, involving parents in education is widely accepted as a means to boost academic progress and preparedness and reducing academic disparities in U.S. schools (Crosnoe, 2009). Therefore, for the purposes of this article, the framework of *working with involved parents* was used. Involved parents refers to the concept that these parents, similar to the mothers cited at the start of the article, are involved in their students' lives, care about their successes, and are planning for their students to attend college. Working with involved parents in this fashion is conceptualized in terms of a social capital. In considering working with parents, social capital is derived from two primary relationships: (a) the relationship between the student and his or her parents and (b) relationships between a student's parents and other individuals, particularly adults connected to schools and the educational systems.

Using a social capital theoretical perspective and framework, Latina/o families develop, promote, and foster parental pre-collegiate enrollment involvement competencies in the context of a two-way stream of communication between home and school. This two-way stream of communication or information flow between the school and home and home and school is intended to promote the preparedness and 4-year college enrollment prospects of Latina/o youth, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, in this study, the absence or presence of social capital, and its corresponding social networks was used as a framework to explore the experiences of Latina parents in the process of obtaining information to support their students' experiences when preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college.

The absence or presence of social capital is critical as going to college and earning a degree is no longer a luxury; rather, a college degree is considered a necessity to gain access to the middle class (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Thus, enrolling in college and obtaining a degree is more important than ever both for today's youth and for society as a whole (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). For example, the opportunity now exists for individuals who obtain a bachelor's degree to earn twice as much over the course of a lifetime as what a high school graduate earns. However, it is not solely the individual person who benefits from going to college; society as a whole gains from having well-educated citizens, including a more competitive private sector, an increase in tax resources, and an increase in public-safety benefits.

Unfortunately, access to a postsecondary education is not equal in the United States (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). First-generation students, students of color, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds are historically underrepresented at the post-secondary level (Wirt et al., 2001). Thus, research indicates these students are much less likely to prepare for, apply for, enroll in, and persist through postsecondary education (Bourdieu, 1973; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Fry, 2004; Nunez, Sparks, & Hernandez, 2011; Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Census data demonstrate that many college-age Latinas/os in the United States are low-income, first-generation students who are uncertain of the requirements to prepare academically for higher education, and perhaps, more importantly, are without direct access to information about higher education (Fry, 2002; Santiago & Brown, 2004).

Although the doors of opportunity to a college education have increased dramatically, more than 17.7 million students were enrolled in colleges and universities nationwide in the fall of 2012 (the most recent year figures are available for), a more than 35% increase since 2000, underrepresentation continues. In 2012, only 14% of students attending 4-year institutions were Latina/o, 15% were Black, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2% were two or more races, compared with 62% White (Excelencia in Education, 2015).

According to the 2010 Census, although Texas is the state with the largest population increase in the nation, due largely to its 85% increase in the Latina/o population, college completion rates indicate that the goal of achieving college success for underrepresented students in the Texas–Mexico border region known as the RGV is still far from being reached (Cortez et al., 2014). That is, only 16% of individuals 25 to 64 years old possess an associate degree or higher compared with 33% nationwide and compared with 37% of White non-Hispanics in the RGV region (Santiago, 2012). Therefore, the degree attainment equity gap between Latina/os and White non-Hispanics in the RGV is an alarming 21% (Santiago, 2012). According to the Texas State Data Center (2009), the RGV, a region made up of four counties and with a population of more than 1.2 million, has some of the highest rates of unemployment, poverty, and high school dropouts in the nation. The unemployment rate is 8 times the state rate. The per capita annual income tends to be much lower than the rest of the state, US$16,717 overall in the state compared with US$5,559 in Starr, one of the RGV counties (Community Office of Affairs Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, n.d.). In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has designated the RGV as an underserved area (Cortez et al., 2014).

Research indicates a variety of factors inform college enrollment, including one's plans and expectations of education, information about college options, abilities and academic preparation, financial aid availability, and the support from adult figures, such as teachers, counselors, relatives, and then peers (Perna, 2000). One of the most salient influencers in shaping students' educational aspirations is parents (Auerbach, 2002; Dearing et al., 2008; Hossler et al., 1998; Spoth et al., 2008). Latina parents are no different (Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009). Much research has described how parents and parental background influence the unequal access as seen across class, race/ethnicity, and income, especially for Latina/o first-generation students (Lareau, 2000; Miller, 1995; Steinberg, 1996; Useem, 1992). More than 30 years ago, DiMaggio (1982) purported that exposure to particular cultural experiences results in the development of knowledge required for low-income and minority parents to help their children reach their college aspirations. In fact, the mother–child relationship is seen as critical in the Latina/o family where mothers are considered "experts in child development" and "'teachers' in the household who transmit cultural knowledge, morals, and instill the concept of *educación*" (Cortez et al., 2014, p. 877).

Villenas and Moreno (2001) were among the first scholars to propose the notion of Latina mothers as the teachers of the household and responsible for instilling in their children the concept of *educación*. As such, mothers in Latina/o households may serve as a resource for preparing and inspiring their sons and daughters to enroll in college.

According to Cortez et al. (2014), specific experiences assist in building social capital through academic socialization in the form of working with parents to help them access and mobilize resources, knowledge, skills, and information embedded in schools. In this study, the researchers were trying to understand the perceptions and experiences of Latina parents when trying to obtain those resources and information to support their students' experiences when preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college.

By the year 2050, Latinas/os will be the dominant ethnic group in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2008). For this reason and others, it is now more important than ever that public policy focus more intently on the academic "pipeline" issues facing Latina/o youth and their families. One poorly understood, and only marginally considered, "pipeline" issue is pre-collegiate preparation programs that focus positively on working with involved parents. Therefore, it is hoped this study makes a contribution in that arena.

Method

This study is part of a larger mixed-method study designed to test the effectiveness of a curriculum to help families provide support in enrolling their students in college. The research was conducted as part of a preliminary focus group study where five populations were interviewed: Latina parents, Latina/o high school students, FES, high school counselors, and currently enrolled Latina/o college students. This article is concerned solely with the focus group study of the Latina parents who were predominantly Spanish-speaking mothers living in *colonia*s—unincorporated settlements that often lack basic utilities such as water, electricity, and sewer systems, and have underdevelopment infrastructure such as paved roads and safe and sanitary housing (Cascos, n.d.).

A team of researchers from a central Texas research university coordinated the focus group portion of the study in conjunction with a family engagement non-profit organization and a South Texas ISD. The ISD was located on the border of Texas and Mexico in a region referred to as the RGV. The university team designed the study and provided all the consent forms, documents, protocols, and study guidelines. Staff members of the non-profit organization, along with an administrator from the ISD, coordinated the recruitment of participants and the site selection, and also assisted in collecting data.

The study used purposive sampling as all of the parents with high school students who were identified as juniors at the beginning of the school year were invited to participate in the focus group. Specifically, three FES, who have contact with the parents as a part of their regular job duties, contacted and recruited the parents from seven high schools located in the ISD. The setting for the focus group was the central offices of the district. The focus group meetings were held at the district administration building in a room regularly used for professional development trainings.

The study was an exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative study that used a naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to generate a clear and accurate portrayal of

the perceptions and experiences of parents of high school students trying to obtain information and resources during the college pre-enrollment process. The naturalistic paradigm considers multiple realities, and it is context-dependent and value-bound (Merriam, 2009). The research was carried out in a natural setting based on the belief that realities are wholes and that, therefore, these realities cannot be understood in isolation from their context and that the realities of a study's context can be fragmented and studied separately as parts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data were collected from a focus group session and analyzed using Hatch's (2002) recommendations regarding the use of inducted methods for transcribed data. The focus group consisted of nine participants, near the recommended number for achieving the greatest amount of give-and-take among participants and facilitators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The design utilized transcriptions to analyze formally the content of the focus groups for major themes. Using an emergent design, the researchers used an open-ended focus group protocol, which was expanded on and revised as the research progressed. The focus group experience included ample opportunity to probe, request clarification, and prompt for more detail or extension, as needed. The questions were largely concerned with what the participants believed "going to college" means, actions on that direction, and experiences when looking for assistance and resources needed in the process of going to college.

The study proposed to answer the following research question:

> **Research Question 1:** What are the perceptions and experiences of Latina mothers of high school students related to accessing information and resources to support their students when preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in postsecondary institutions?

Once the data were transcribed, they were unitized by several members of the research team, and data analysis was carried out as a group activity by the research team (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were divided into units of meaning that served as a basis for defining categories. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit should be the smallest piece of information about something that can conceivably stand on its own. In addition, a unit should be heuristic, that is, aimed at an understanding the inquirer needs to possess or an action the inquirer needs to take. Having located a unit of data, the analyst enters it onto an index card; each unit of data was coded using the constant-comparative method and a content analysis design to develop categories and themes as results of the analysis process. The two categories and five themes are shared in the "Findings" section of this article.

The research team ensured trustworthiness; indeed, the planning for trustworthiness started at the design phase of the study. For example, the researchers applied several techniques such as *member checks* during the focus group sessions, *reflexive journaling* during the collection and analysis of data, *triangulation* of participants and sources of data, and *peer debriefing* among several members of the research team.

Participants

Participants were from an ISD located in the South Texas border region. All were first-generation, immigrant Latina mothers; predominately Spanish speakers; and in most cases, their high school son/daughter will be the first in their family to attend college. Because the study was concerned with the perceptions and experiences of Latina parents related to accessing information and resources to aid their students in enrolling in postsecondary institutions, demographic information such as socio-economic status and marital status of the Latina parents was not collected as a part of this study. Information about participants is presented in Table 1.

The study was qualitative research, which by nature means findings are not generalizable. However, the hope is that the study's findings are transferable, meaning there is a degree to which the results transfer to other contexts and settings that are similar in nature to the one studied. As a result, deep thick description of the study is provided to accomplish this goal of transferability. The following section details the study's findings.

Findings

The following represent the themes that achieved theoretical saturation, which is redundancy of data falling within the categories. The categories are organized around five primary themes in response to the Research Question 1.

The themes include (a) perceptions of the school system, (b) perceptions of being between two cultures, (c) the influence of family, (d) our community, and (e) the unknown world of higher education. The findings, gleaned from the participants sharing their experience navigating the process of their students' application and enrollment in postsecondary institutions, are organized considering (a) the *perceptions* that parents have to gain access to knowledge about college and (b) the *experiences* accessing the information related to building college awareness, including college readiness and gaining college access, overcoming barriers, and getting support during the process.

Perceptions of the School System

This theme addresses how the relationship between parents, administrators, and counselors works; that is, how the information gets from the school to the parents. It specifically addresses the absence of social capital regarding the information flow between home and school. Many of the mothers reported a lack of knowledge regarding the U.S school system. This situation makes them feel anxiety and stress; and, in general, as a result, they described feeling uncomfortable interacting with the administrators and teachers at their student's school. Because many of the mothers had gone through an education system in Mexico, and the education system in the United States is different, they reported the struggles they have had in trying to understand the U.S. education system.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics.

Parents	Number of children	Description
Mother 1	5	The oldest child has graduated from high school. One is currently in high school; there is no information on the others.
Mother 2	1	Her daughter is in 12th grade and wants to dance on a college dance team. Her daughter is also interested in education.
Mother 3	3	Two of her children have gone to college; one is a teacher, and the other is getting his sociology associate's degree. The third is a senior in high school and hopes to become a police officer.
Mother 4	3	Her oldest child is a junior in high school and is looking into a career in law enforcement, patrol force, or U.S. Customs.
Mother 5	2	The oldest child is a senior, who is looking into art, but for now, he wants to study communications.
Mother 6	3	The oldest child is 23 years old. Another son is in the 10th grade.
Mother 7	3	The oldest child is an adult; he is trying to learn English and finish school. The two younger girls, who have been in the United States for a few years, are adapting to all the changes.
Mother 8	4	The oldest child is in college. The second one is in the ninth grade; the other two are in middle school.
Mother 9	4	One child is working on a master's degree. The other is studying sociology, and a third child is in special education classes. The youngest is in the ninth grade. The youngest is the one she is struggling with, as he does not want to go to school.

One of the mothers expressed,

cuando llegué, así como perdida, o sea que los créditos . . . para empezar, o sea, llegas y donde está la dirección? porque yo llego y le pregunto al niño, donde está la dirección? . . . me dice que es eso? [risas] . . . yo quiero la dirección, o sea, con el director, o sea, todo bien diferente, verdad? [When I arrived [to the United States], I was like lost, to start about the grades; then even where was the principal office? I asked my kid, where is the director office [principal office]? He told me what is that? I wanted to talk with the Principal, here everything is different.]

Thus, our results revealed a lack of communication between the school system and the parents, which is associated with an absence of social capital, meaning that the information flow between the parents and the school is not reciprocated. This causes a lot of information to be overlooked.

For example, another mother explained, " . . . y no preguntas por miedo de que, a no pues es que no, o porque no sabes ingles te quedas . . . callada . . . " ["And you don't ask because you are afraid, you don't, you don't know English, so you don't talk, you stay silent."].

Yet, the focus groups revealed that parents want to know more about the school system and higher education, including information related specifically to college

readiness. Specifically, participants expressed a desire to understand the grading system, learn about advanced placement courses, know the curriculum their students should be enrolled in to help them get into college, and how to obtain financial aid. A mother talked about the need to get information from the school and options about college:

> Pues saber, qué ofrecen . . . que programa, cuales clases de AP o Dual Enrollment y si les van a ayudar para la universidad, cuáles sí, cuáles no, esas preguntas que necesitamos saber, y que nos expliquen para que nosotros entendamos, y que nosotros nos sintamos confortables al preguntar. [To know, what they offered . . . what programs, what AP classes, or dual enrollment; and if those are going to help in the university, which ones yes, and which ones no; all those questions that we need to know, and to have someone that explain to us, so we understand; so we feel comfortable asking.]

In addition, parents face difficulties navigating the school system. They struggle understanding whom to approach and whom to ask; whether they should approach the administrators or teachers regarding their questions. Counselors and FES become the liaison between parents and administrators and teachers. FES are paid liaisons working for the school district. They are sent to schools ranging from the elementary level to high school, and the mothers in this study described them as an important source of support. Thus, the relationship between the FES and mothers serves as a source of positive social capital and aids in the reciprocal information flow and communication between the school and the mothers. Parents explained the importance of attending meetings in the school "[Participar en las] juntas que tenemos los padres es bien importante porque aprendemos bastante" ["[To participate in the] meetings that we, the parents, have; it is very important because we learn a lot."].

Overall, Latina mothers described that they face difficulties when navigating the U.S. education system. However, FES serve as a support system providing them with positive social capital and a critical source of support.

Perceptions of Being Between Two Cultures

This theme includes issues that relate to families that only speak Spanish. Again, the mothers reported an absence of information flow on the schools' part: The schools do not get information to them. There is a barrier between families that only speak Spanish and an education system that allows a lot of information to remain un-accessed. A mother explained her difficulties due to the language: "cuando llegué así como perdida, o sea que los créditos . . . para empezar; llegas y donde está la dirección, porque yo llegué y le pregunté al niño, ¿dónde está la dirección?" ["When I got here, I was like lost such as 'credits'? . . . To start, you arrives and you don't know even where is the 'principal's office,' so I asked to a kid, 'where is the 'direction' [principal's office]?'"].

Another problem is that the information stops at the students and often does not make its way into the hands of the parents. As a result, the education system feels that it is getting the information out to everyone, but the parents report that they remain

clueless. A parent reported a situation where, until recently, her daughter was the only one who received the information:

> ella sabe todo, ella sola, le dicen lo que va a hacer y ella sola, y ahora que pasó a la media (middle school) decía: ¿yo no tengo que ir firmar algo mi hija? . . . no . . . yo lo hago, y te estoy hablando de que casi 20 años que yo ya tenía aquí, y que apenas me estoy involucrando con la otra [daughter]. [She knows everything by herself, she is told what to do; now that she passed to middle school, I asked if I need to sign something, and she told me, 'No, I do it.' I am talking of almost 20 years here and only until now I am getting involved with the other one [daughter].]

Also, parents reported a lack of friendly informational sessions by university recruiters. As one mother described,

> si . . . mi hija fue pero regresó . . . como dice, a medias . . . entonces yo digo que tiene que saber que gente van a mandar para que tengan paciencia con los estudiantes, verdad? Porque dice que ella fue y le pregunto: Sir, ah . . . pues qué es lo que necesito hacer, verdad? Que aplicación . . . y dijo: ten, ahí está el papel y eso es lo que tienes que hacer, y ella dijo: si, pero quería . . . quería información de qué es lo que ofrece la escuela . . . pues metete ahí y ahí te dicen lo que tienes, o sea, me quedé yo . . . con esas paginitas, les dan paginitas y las que no sabemos abrir la computadora nos quedamos en cero. [My daughter went and she came back with partial information . . . I think they should send people that is patient with the students, don't you? Because she went and asked: Sir, what I need to do, what application? The person [the recruiter] responded: Here, it's in the paper, that's what you have to do . . . She wanted information about college . . . He said, go to the website . . . And I think, they gave us those website, and what happened with the ones that don't know how to open a computer, we stay in "zero."]

Parents use different tools to acquire a new language in spite of their constraints. The mothers reported the challenges that they face at home and at school as Spanish speakers when they try to help their students. Conversely, they recognize that coming from another culture is a strength that can be a benefit—a value added to their student's life. Yet, mothers perceived that the school system does not value the knowledge of another language and does not take advantage of their skills and culture.

One of the mothers explained the work involved:

> y también nos costó bastante trabajo el idioma, y yo me ponía con mis hijos a hacer la tarea, no sé bien inglés, sé lo básico pero lo que no entendía, con un diccionario me ponía con ellos a traducir y a hacer tareas . . . y aprendimos. [And it was a lot of work with the language, but I worked with my kids in their homework, without knowing well English, just the basic, but I understood with a dictionary, and I translated and did the homework . . . we learned.]

Overall, mothers reported their background as a cultural strength, yet the schools did not necessarily perceive this to be the case.

The Influence of Family

Our participants expressed that Latina/o families have a strong influence on students' educational decisions and aspirations. This influence can come from immediate and/or extended family members. Mothers described themselves as maintaining the role of nurturer in the home and perceived raising their children as a personal but necessary sacrifice. They did not see this sacrifice as hindering to themselves or to their children; rather, it was an asset and a shared responsibility with the schools.

As one mother explained,

> . . . pero son más los sacrificios que se hacen, pero como . . . como dijo ella, es desde que . . . entran a la escuela tenemos que tomar el trabajo nosotros los padres de que no es el trabajo de los maestros solos . . . tenemos que estar compartiendo con ellos . . . [There are more the sacrifices that we do, since they start school, we need to understand that it's not only the work of the teachers, we have to share it with them.]

Many reported that fathers tended to be absent from their sons' and daughters' responsibilities in school. Therefore, the mothers believed themselves to be responsible for instilling in their children the concept *educación*. Overall, the participants identified the role of the mother as being the person responsible for taking care of their children's education.

One participant revealed, ". . . pues siempre nos echan a cargar todo eso a las mamás . . ." ["We always get it [responsibility], we [moms] carry all that."].

In addition, the mothers reported that there is a difference in how parents raise older children and younger children; older children are given more responsibilities most of the time, so this leaves them little time to pursue higher education. Despite this perception, the mothers reported that, ultimately, parents have one goal for all of their children, "que ellos no pasen las dificultades que yo he pasado," or "for them not go through the same difficulties that they went through." However, many times, they do not know how to reach this goal.

The participants reported that although other Latina/o families may have different goals for their children—some have plans for them to graduate from high school and for them to come back home to help support the family—these mothers all reported the desire for their children to attend college and to be role models for the rest of the family. The dream they have for their daughters are particularly inspiring.

One of the mothers shared,

> . . . será porque siempre yo le he. les he metido que tienes que ir porque, yo le digo tú tiene que ir al colegio, tienes que estudiar para que no tengas que depender de un hombre, (ininteligible) (murmullos) tú sola, vas a depender de ti misma, no vas a necesitar a nadie, si te llegas a casar, bien, si no, pues ya tienes tu carrera y no te complicas de nada y . . . tú sigue adelante y . . . tú les vas a poner, poner el ejemplo a tus dos hermanas, porque tengo, yo tengo dos más chiquitas, y que tú tienes que ponerle el ejemplo a ellas, y tú haz de cuenta que ahorita que estamos nomás contigo, dedicándonos a ti, tu les vasa enseñar el camino a . . . [Maybe it is because I always have told them that they have to go to

college, you have to study so you don't have to depend of a man, by yourself; you are not going to need of anybody, if you get married, well, okay, but if not, you will have your profession and you won't complicate your life, you can go ahead . . . You are making the example for your sisters; we are focusing in you right now, but you are going to show them the way . . .]

Parents are willing to invest in their students' education as a way to obtain a better future. The participants in this study noted that, besides any challenge they might face, they want a better life for their students.

Our Community

All of the mothers in this study lived in a *colonia*, the Spanish term for neighborhood or community. In Texas, a colonia refers to "unincorporated settlements that often lack basic utilities such as water, electricity, and sewer systems, and have underdevelopment infrastructure such as paved roads and safe and sanitary housing" (Cascos, n.d.). Texas has the largest number of colonias, more than 1,400 and the largest colonia population in the nation (Community Affairs Office of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 1995). The residents of the colonias generally have very low incomes, high numbers of high school dropouts, and higher numbers of unemployment.

In spite of these factors, the community pulls together resources to help students succeed. The community offers many services although, frequently, the mothers reported that they do not know about them. However, overall, neighbors help each other out and provide social capital to one another in an effort to help each other navigate and access community services. Also, parents recognize the need for other adults who have graduated from college to serve as role models in the *educación* of their children, so they turn to their community for help.

The mothers explained how the community works together to provide support to students and families. The community as a whole helps to get information to everyone and sometimes provides valuable resources to aid in the building of college awareness. In addition, the mothers reported that many times, they get information regarding available resources from the community churches they attend.

Although college outreach programs are available in the community, not all parents know about them. Therefore, friends from the community often offer parents the keys they need to learn about how to open the door for their sons and daughters to enroll in college.

One mother explained how she relied on one of her friends from the community to provide her with information:

. . . pues a mí me lo dijo una amiga y . . . y fue del modo que yo me enteré y de hecho no . . . no sabía del programa, me imagino que mucha no gente no sabe, no sé . . . [One of my friends told me, that was the way I heard about the program [at the school], I imagine that many people do not know about it.]

Although parents access information from the school or other resources, many times, they follow the advice of neighbors or other members of the community.

The Unknown World of Higher Education

Many of the mothers described their fears related to the unknown world of higher education. They do not know the ins and outs of university life. In addition, they worry about their children being away from home. Many children "travel alone" to college for the first time as their parents do not know how to help them. This situation can generate miscommunication between parents and their children. Parents recognize the importance of having college knowledge: "tener contactos con las universidades, que las universidades se acerquen hacia los padres de familia y no nada más hacia los hijos, porque muchas veces pues es un equipo y ustedes se sienten parte del equipo" ["to have contact with the universities, that the universities get closer to the parents and not only closer to the students, because many times this should be a team, and we [parents] are part of the team."].

In addition, many of the mothers reported that they worry about the means to pay for college, and they have not received enough information about financial aid. By having information on scholarships and how to pay for college, they feel they will be better able to assist their students.

One mother detailed,

> . . . el dinero, las calificaciones, los scholarships, todo eso, quien ofrece más scholarships y eso es lo que necesitamos saber para . . . decidir . . . sobre todo por que y como vamos a pagar . . . [The cost, the grades, scholarships, all that, who offers scholarships, we need to know, so we can decide, and to know why and how we are going to pay.]

The mothers clearly articulated their perception that going to college is associated with getting a better life. They feel that going to college means having the opportunity to get a good job that will result in doing better financially. A degree is seen as a pathway to future success in life. As one mother described, ". . . [Yo les digo que] puede encontrar un mejor trabajo, que les paguen mejor, que no teniendo . . . un degree." ["[I told them that] that they can find a better job, where they get a better salary if they have a degree."].

Going to college was seen as a way for their students, in particular, their daughters to be self-sufficient and autonomous. A college degree would grant their daughters a level of independence she might not otherwise have. As one mother added regarding a conversation with her daughter, "yo le digo tú tiene que ir al colegio, tienes que estudiar para que no tengas que depender de un hombre; tú sola, vas a depender de ti misma, no vas a necesitar a nadie" ["I told her, you have to go to college, you have to study so you don't have to depend of a man; by yourself, you will depend of yourself, you are not going to need anybody."].

Overall, although participants discussed their lack of knowledge regarding financial aid and the cost of college—along with worrying about the unknown territory of

higher education—each of the mothers in the focus group expressed the desire for their sons and daughters to attend college—"Nuestros hijos van a la universidad."

Discussion and Significance of Findings

This study proposed to answer the following research question:

> What are the perceptions and experiences of Latina mothers of high school students related to accessing information and resources to support their students when preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in postsecondary institutions?

Overall, the study's findings are important because the national portrait of access to college and attainment of college degrees shows continuing inequalities based on class, race/ethnicity, and income, especially for Latina/o first-generation students. Yet, few studies have considered the perceptions and experiences of Latina/o parents with regard to accessing information and resources to support their students when preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in postsecondary institutions.

Although the Latina mothers in this focus group study described perceived challenges related to obtaining information and resources to increase college readiness, college knowledge, and college access to help their students enroll in college, they also described strengths.

In terms of social capital, information flow is not reciprocal when it comes to the schools communicating with parents. There are constraints that make it difficult for parents to interact regularly with school personnel. For instance, parents do not know how the school organization works; therefore, they do not know the office they need to go to or whom to speak to when they have complaints or simply want help. Pamphlets or handouts are not always a suitable way of communication; parents need an introduction to the system before getting written information. Many parents cannot translate the knowledge, skills, and values gained in their native language into the new language. In the same way as their children, they need time to acquire the language and live experiences in which they use their knowledge.

Although schools may believe they are reaching parents with information and resources related to building college awareness, the mothers of this study indicated that this is not the case. Yet, engaging with the district-appointed FES was seen as a positive way to obtain resources and knowledge related to college readiness, college knowledge, and college access. This finding supports that of Swail and Perna (2002), who in their research on pre-college outreach programs found having paid staff members available to assist with pre-college outreach to be of value. This is significant because it demonstrates the ways social capital can be transferred between schools and parents rather than placing the onus solely on parents and students to overcome any perceived "lack."

In addition, mothers described their cultural background, their ability to speak Spanish, and their experiences growing up in a foreign country as a potential strength. These strengths can assist in seeing the ways parents, in particular Latina mothers, add value to their children's educational aspirations. That is, although parents recognize

they operate in a state of discomfort when interacting with the school system, schools need to find ways to recognize parents' knowledge of another language and culture as a positive factor.

This finding supports Tierney and Hagedorn's (2002) view that it is false to believe that Latina/o families are devoid of culture, empty vessels needing to be filled up with the ways of mainstream traditions by our schools. Rather, the cultural and social capital and cultural integrity that Latina/o families add to their students' lives should be honored, affirmed, and acknowledged.

Despite the mothers' concerns regarding how to finance college, many do not see this as an obstacle. In fact, many see it as an opportunity to show how they can overcome difficulties to ensure a better future for their children: "Que ellos no pasen las dificultades que yo he pasado" ["That they don't go through the difficulties that I have been going through."]. This is significant because it dispels the assumption of a deficit model that insufficient funds are a "lack" that Latina/o families need to overcome. Rather, the Latina mothers in this study focused on the opportunities that come from enrolling in and graduating from college.

Relatives, friends, and community organizations are resources that families rely on to increase college readiness, college knowledge, and college access. However, many parents do not know about these resources. Latina/o communities need programs that help as many families as possible to receive the keys they need to help their students enroll and graduate from college. Parents believe that college is an important goal, not only a personal goal but also a family goal. However, they want to know how to achieve it. They know there are keys available to support their students to prepare for and enroll in college, yet they do not always know how to obtain these keys.

There are limitations to the study. Although the purposive sample of nine participants accords near the recommended number for achieving the greatest amount of give-and-take among participants and facilitators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), engaging more parents in additional focus groups with students across all high school grade levels would provide additional thick, rich data descriptions. However, the sample recruited here is not dissimilar in terms of other studies of Latina mothers' experiences related to college knowledge, college readiness, and college access (Cortez et al., 2014).

In addition, although every effort was made to capture a comprehensive and broad range of comments and stories from the mothers, it is possible that the range of experiences was incomplete. On the positive side, the methodology for the study has shown itself to be valuable in capturing the subjective experiences of individuals in a group. The qualitative methods used in the study, make the approach potentially more acceptable across a range of epistemological perspectives.

Conclusion

This study found that culturally responsive and responsible efforts, information, and communication resulting in social capital are lacking between the schools and Latina/o families. To build true college awareness, college readiness, college knowledge, and college access, and thereby increase college enrollment, systems need to cultivate the

kinds of social capital that not only gives families and students the keys to get them to the college door but the keys that allow students to be sustained and nurtured all the way *through* college (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). *Working with*, not simply involving Latina/o families, is the key.

Although many schools purport to involve parents and include Latina/o families in their college awareness efforts, often these collaborations are more lip service than reality. The Latina mothers in our study indicated that they are eager and willing to coordinate, collaborate, and join in schools' college readiness efforts. Building on the knowledge they already possess and the community support systems they have developed, they have every intention of their students applying to, enrolling in, attending, persisting through, and graduating from college. Yet, they realize that they could benefit even more from the support and guidance from educators, scholars, researchers, policy makers, administrators, teachers, staff, and FES to capitalize on these endeavors. Research on Latina/o families should continue, as the more information garnered on how to help families get their children to and through college the better our education systems will be.

In conclusion, it is the researchers' hope that by working with involved Latina/o families, they acknowledge and honor the diverse identities that account for those families who are using and relying on the U.S. educational systems to extend to *all* students the realized possibility of obtaining and thriving as a result of a college education.

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