

# Educating the Educator: Hispanic women in a new social context

## Alfabetizando al alfabetizador: Mujeres hispanas en un nuevo contexto social

Research

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### Abstract

The Hispanic population in the United States continues growing steadily and rapidly. This fertile and constant growth has reorganized the country's social milieu and exposes immigrants to social, linguistic and educational realities that were previously unknown. Hispanic immigrant English Language Learners are immersed in a completely unfamiliar academic system, and face linguistic challenges that must be overcome if they are to be successful in school. In the same way, immigrant parents undergo similar challenges in their work environments in which language and other social barriers impede their professional success and involvement in their children's academic life. This work presents the experiences of Hispanic students and mothers in the United States through the eyes of four Hispanic immigrant women. In depth interviews were used to test for the impact that parental involvement has in the academic development of Hispanic students in the United States.

**Keywords:** ELL, HSS, BLL, parental involvement, immigrant women, hispanic students.

### Resumen

La población hispana en Estados Unidos continúa aumentando establemente y de forma rápida. Este incremento fértil y constante de hispanos ha reorganizado el matiz social del país y expone a los inmigrantes a unas realidades sociales, lingüísticas y educativas no conocidas anteriormente. Estudiantes inmigrantes hispanos aprendices del idioma inglés son inmersos en un sistema educativo completamente desconocido y se enfrentan a un reto lingüístico que necesitan rebasar de forma diligente para tener éxito en sus escuelas. A su vez, los padres inmigrantes atraviesan otros retos similares en sus ambientes laborales en los cuales el idioma y otros componentes sociales les dificultan el éxito profesional y el involucramiento en las escuelas de sus hijos. Este artículo expone las realidades de los estudiantes hispanos y las madres hispanas en Estados Unidos a través de los ojos de cuatro madres hispanas inmigrantes. Mediante la entrevista profunda, este trabajo expone el impacto que tiene la participación parental en el desenvolvimiento escolar y académico de los estudiantes hispanos en Estados Unidos.

**Descriptores:** ELL, HSS, BLL, consorcio parental, inmigrantes hispanas, estudiantes hispanos.

## Introduction

The Hispanic population will double in quantity by 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). It is alarming that the US education system does not provide many Hispanic students with the tools they need to learn English (Schneider, Martinez, and Owens, 2006), become bilingual (Pentón Herrera and Duany, 2016) or graduate (Balfanz et al., 2014). This will lead to an even greater social and educational gap in the United States by 2060 that will divide generations of illiterate Hispanic families whose grandparents, parents, and children did not receive the education necessary to succeed in their professional lives (Putman et al. Al., 2016). Contributing to the development of future generations of Hispanic students in the United States is therefore of great importance.

The current Hispanic student population attending elementary and secondary schools in the United States is divided into two main groups: (1) Hispanic immigrant students English Language Learners (ELLs) and (2) Hispanic students who were born and raised in the United States, known as Spanish-speakers by inheritance (HSS). Although there is a large difference in the social and academic realities of ELLs and HSS, studies show that both groups of Hispanic students have poor academic performance (Jacobs, 2016; Sparks, 2015). For their part, the HSS use Spanish limitedly. This, together with the strong influence of the English language on their lives, has an impact on the development of academic literacy skills in both languages (Viola and Stefan, 2014).

Immigrant students from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are currently the fastest growing ELL population in primary and secondary schools in the United States (Ferris and Raley, 2016). A recent publication by Pentón Herrera and Duany (2016) highlights the academic and linguistic needs of this student population and introduces the concept of binary language learners (BLL) to describe a large proportion of immigrant students of these

countries. BLLs are students who, in addition to being ELLs, are illiterate, or have low proficiency in their language skills in their mother tongue (L1), in this case Spanish. BLLs arrive in US classrooms with large deficiencies in Spanish language skills that were not met in their home countries. The problem is that schools in the United States do not have the resources to fill these gaps. As a result, parents become the most powerful source of support and bridge that helps build networks of support among their children, school, community and home. These support networks provide the necessary strength for students to integrate into the academic process, take control of their educational process, and succeed in developing academic and language skills.

Many studies suggest that parental involvement in the academic affairs of their younger children is the key to their success. This is particularly true in the case of Hispanic students attending schools in the United States (Gonzalez et al., 2014, Hugo López, 2009, LaBahn, 1995, Panferov, 2010). On the other hand, other studies demonstrate the negative impact of lack of parental involvement in our society, our schools, and the academic success of Hispanic students (LaBahn, 1995). However, there are not many studies that discuss cultural differences and specifically define what parental involvement means.

This study is framed in sociological theories about social roles and motivation to listen how Hispanic mothers become vehicles that catalyze the academic success of their children. The study evaluates the positions of Hispanic immigrant mothers who participated in in-depth interviews to analyze their feelings about the importance of educating themselves as adults. Arriving into adulthood, these women had the option of working or not and studying or not in order to achieve their purposes. Some used their own education as a vehicle to promote their children's student success. Others valued their role as mothers within the family nucleus and chose not to follow their academic goals. The study provided a particular opportunity to evaluate three essential principles: how educa-



tion for adults promotes the academic success of children; how education for adults promotes parental involvement in the schools of their children; and what motivations or situations make it possible for Hispanic immigrant mothers to choose to educate themselves and seek better job opportunities when they arrive in the United States.

## Theoretical basis

The impact of the parental consortium on the academic success of students is an issue that concerns teachers, administrators and public policy makers. In the field of education, parental involvement or consortium is defined as the interaction of parents with schools and their children to promote their academic success (Kim and Hill, 2015). Parental involvement extends not only to the school environment, but also to the home. This means that the parental consortium includes the commitment of parents to provide, consistently, resources necessary for their children to achieve success in the academic environment.

Several researches discuss the relationship between the parental consortium and the academic success of the children (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014, Harris and Goodall, 2008, Kim and Hill, 2015, Wilder, 2014). Studies highlight laboral commitment as one of the most important impediments to parents' integration into the educational process of their children (Harris and Goodall, 2008). This is joined by ignorance of the language and illiteracy that prevents parents from engaging in the academic process and getting more involved with the schools. As a result, many programs have been designed to provide parents with the opportunity to become actively involved in promoting the academic success of their children (Harris and Goodall, 2008). These programs identify parents as agents for the academic success of minors and count on them to ensure that students have an equitable and fair opportunity to achieve their educational and professional goals.

The commitment that the parents assume in the home lays the foundation for the success-

ful academic performance of the children. Wilder (2014) found that parental involvement has a strong and positive impact on the development of study habits in minors and their subsequent academic success. This study identified a correlation between parental involvement in the home and the academic achievement of children. When parents become involved in the academic life of their children from home, students gain better grades and are more successful in school. Similarly, Harris and Goodall (2008) argue that parental involvement in the children's learning process causes enormous differences in the academic achievement of the latter. This implies that parents have to be actively involved in setting standards, and guiding and working with their student children at home. This active engagement on the part of parents has a positive effect on subsequent learning and career success (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

When parents become involved in school, a parent, home, and school synergy is created. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) found that parental involvement is instrumental in the regeneration process of school environments particularly in schools where children are not performing as expected. In addition, parents, as co-educators in schools, contribute to improving school culture. Parental involvement is a reflection of the interest that parents have in the academic success of their children. For this reason, parents who actively engage, strengthen family-school relationships, and promote children's success from home. Taking this into consideration, it is imperative to consider what motivations enable Hispanic immigrant parents to develop the skills necessary for their improvement and to support their children.

This analysis obliges to revisit the theme of the sociology of education and integrate the issue of culture and established social norms. The social norms that prevail in the Latin American countries are transferred to the United States with each immigrant and are put into practice among culturally homogeneous groups. Undoubtedly, the culture that is experienced in the country of origin, particularly the Spanish-speaking countries,



is different from that experienced in the United States. This implies that, in this process of adaptation, the social and cultural practices that were brought will be strengthened. Immigrants will seek to identify themselves with groups similar to their own so that they can integrate more effectively and accelerate the process of adaptation. Now, the more immigrants seek to associate with those groups with which they identify, the less they integrate into the culture of the new country and have less need to learn the new language.

One of the traits that the immigrant brings with him and that implements in the country to which he immigrates is the one of the gender roles. Lewis (2003) states that the differentiation between masculinity and femininity depends on issues of national identity, class, race, religion and ethnicity, among other factors. From this perspective, the definition of gender is socially constructed in light of the perceived differences between the biological determinants of women and men. This implies that gender roles, or social expectations imposed on each person according to their gender, are culturally created and assigned in the light of social construction based on traditions and customs. So, to understand some social behaviors that people adopt in the educational, professional or family sphere, it is imperative to know the social differences that prevail between masculinity and femininity (Toledo López, 2002). The social expectations that are imposed on men and women impact their behaviors and the decisions they make throughout their lives. The process of socialization leads individuals to understand that they must behave in a certain way to fulfill the social expectations that have been imposed on them by reason of their sex.

These patterns of behavior are recreated and revived abroad when the Hispanic family migrates. Women, for their part, remain limited to the confines of the Hispanic community where they chose to live to facilitate their integration, while the man breaks the boundaries of the neighborhood or community to expose themselves to social, linguistic and economic challenges in order to provide for your family. Gender roles in their

country of origin are rebuilt in the new environment in which women remain under the control of man - husband, father, brother or son - and is more or less treated as a minor (Bullough, 1979). According to Dávila (2013), the male-female relationship between Hispanics is a dominant man and submissive woman in which women are carried away by social norms that build them dependent and incapable of assuming great responsibilities. This explains why Hispanic women, when arriving in the United States, are locked within the borders of their community and are not exposed to learn the language. It is a protection mechanism that will eventually have a direct impact on your life and that of the children. Foster (1994) attributes this very Hispanic custom to three important factors: the military discipline that has prevailed in many Central and South American countries; Catholic morality prevailing in Hispanic societies; and traditional Hispanic family beliefs that make women circumscribe to clearly established roles.

This cultural phenomenon has serious implications, particularly for Hispanic women, within the new social context they face. The Hispanic immigrant woman does not find valid reasons to educate herself neither linguistically nor professionally since, within the confines of her community, another language besides Spanish is unnecessary. Working is not required either because the husband is the one who provides. Their needs are established within their new environment to ensure the protection they allegedly need. Within the sheltered and protected environment, they communicate in their language and fulfill the tasks that their customs and traditions allowed to them. As long as man exists, they attend the home not only because they are protected there, but also because that is their work as a woman. The upbringing of children belongs to them, which also represents a huge challenge because they cannot integrate into the school environment of these nor can they assist them in their learning process and social, cultural and linguistic integration.

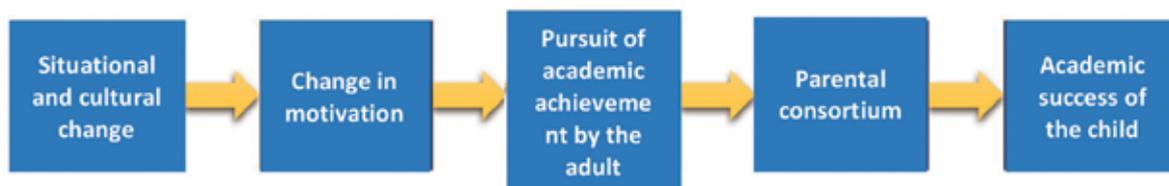
The absence of men in the family and social picture of the Hispanic immigrant causes their



structures and needs to be redefined. Their needs are reorganized and assume a new hierarchical order. According to Maslow (1943), human needs are organized hierarchically from those that pose full subsistence to those that compete for self-realization. To meet higher-hierarchy needs, it is imperative to meet those that are at the base and that guarantee life and other basic human needs. Achieving certain goals, says Maslow (1943), motivates human beings to progress to new horizons and meet other needs. For example, once subsistence, roof and shelter are guaranteed, other needs such as personal enhancement, community service and creative action can take place. This theory allows us to understand why, in the presence of a male figure in the home, Hispanic immigrant women in the United States have no reason to educate themselves, learn the English language and seek to integrate into the general American culture. Within the communal limits and her home she feels protected. This sense of protection is not such that it allows moving beyond to meet other needs, but enough to feel that you live with the minimum necessary. She dedicates herself to her family and fulfills her gender role, as her culture establishes it. The challenge begins when the man - husband, son, and father - is absent either by death, relocation, divorce or any other reason. This challenges established social standards and forces Hispanic immigrant women to take positions that were not previously required. This breaks their schemes and forces them to move from their comfort zone in an environment that, for a long time, was unknown to them. Motivation, then, arises because of a change

in her life situation - the absence of the male figure - and moves her to advance her studies and work, which, in turn, creates the conditions for their integration into the life of their children. In short, it is presented as a chain of events that unite, produce the link between academic and professional improvement as an adult and the positive performance of their children in the school environment.

In summary, this study posits that the social and cultural situations of Hispanic immigrant women establish the framework within which she acts upon arriving in the United States. As long as the circumstances that allow her to maintain and revive the gender roles that her culture imposes on her are perpetuated, they will continue to fulfill her role as a housewife. However, when her environment is altered and situations change, the necessary motivations arise so that she breaks schemes and seeks to meet other needs that she did not have as a priority. In seeking to meet other needs, such as educational and professional, they create environments more conducive for their children to reach their academic goals in a healthy and stable environment. With knowledge of English, the immigrant Hispanic woman can be inserted in the US job and education market, which in turn will allow her to become actively involved in the academic process of her children. In this way, adult education is established as a mechanism through which the academic successes of the children are promoted. Graphically, this situational / motivational hypothesis can be summarized as follows:



## Methodological basis

To corroborate this hypothesis, four in-depth interviews were conducted with four Hispanic

women who immigrated to the United States. The work variable was used as a classification factor. In other words, their characteristics are essentially similar since they are all women, Hispanics, immigrants and mothers, but two worked outside



the home and two are housewives. The interviews are in the form of case studies about the experiences of these women in the management of their family environment. The four cases allow us to analyze how the involvement or lack of it, of these mothers in the academic processes of their children has impacted the subsequent development of the young in the school environment. Similarly, the interviews shed light on the motivations of the participating mothers to find a job, learn the English language and get involved in the academic processes of their children.

The case study turns out to be the most appropriate investigative methodology for this analysis. This methodology allows exploring the phenomenon under study from multiple perspectives, which helps to see the multidimensional nature of the subject (Baxter and Jack, 2008). In addition, it allows us to analyze the context within which the phenomenon under study occurs (Yin, 2003). Both of these strengths allow the case study to be used effectively in the present analysis. This study looks at why Hispanic immigrant women choose to work and learn English as a second language. It focuses on the contextual conditions of each of them and looks at their life histories to identify factors that motivated them or not to explore labor and linguistic alternatives. The analysis of these cases allows to see how the different circumstances impact in different ways the lives of these women who participated in the study. Naturally, the analysis starts from control variables that allow to see the impact of the study variables on the motivations and situations of the participants. The decision of these women to learn or not a second language and to work or not allows us to understand the dynamics of adult education and understand how the education of mothers and their involvement in the educational process of their children impacts academic development of the minors.

Thus, the participants in this study fall into one of two groups: those who work and speak English, and those who do not work and do not speak English. These participants come from four

Spanish speaking countries, El Salvador, Cuba, Colombia and Honduras. The questions asked were based on the immigration experience, the time of entry to the United States, the family and social context under which they entered and their knowledge of the English language upon entering. Likewise, their current family situation was explored, their knowledge of English at the present time, the work situation and the motivations they had to change their lives or to remain in situations similar to those that existed when they entered the United States.

## Analysis and results

### Bilingual, working participants

Two participants reported working at the time of the interview and able to communicate in both English and Spanish. Both arrived in the United States more than sixteen years ago, but one began to learn English before the other. The participant from Colombia, who immigrated alone with her daughters, began her process of learning the second language as soon as she arrived in the United States. The participant from Honduras, however, showed an interest in learning English after nine years of being in the United States. The Colombian participant indicated that the learning of English was indispensable to her every time she had to provide for her daughters. She understood that learning English allowed her to grow professionally so that she could help her daughters to develop appropriately in an environment that was foreign to them. Likewise, she indicated that a factor of great weight that moved her to learn English immediately was her need to understand the American educational system and its functioning. She valued highly her ability to communicate with her daughters' teachers to identify ways in which she could help the minors in a difficult social, academic, and linguistic adjustment process. Learning English allowed her to integrate more easily into her community and



to undertake professionally in a difficult labor field. It also allowed her to communicate with the teachers of her daughters, to explore alternatives of studies for the minors and to assist them in their academic process. She served as a model for both of her daughters who today are highly trained professionals with linguistic skills in both English and Spanish.

Upon arrival, the Colombian participant rested upon on her two daughters to communicate. The children acquired English language skills with relative ease. They communicated with their schoolmates and their teachers, and demonstrated academic success and good social adjustment. At that stage, the two children aided their mother to adjust to the new social and economic context. They served as interpreters and helped her communicate effectively. Because she had arrived alone in the United States, the Colombian participant understood it imperative to learn the language and work in a way that could provide for her daughters. Her motivation was clear and, in essence, the situation she faced forced her to assume important roles that, typically, our societies assigned to men.

For her part, the Honduran participant left her country of origin in search of better living conditions for her family. She arrived in the United States with her then husband and settled in a social and cultural environment that supported her roots. Given their lack of knowledge of the language and social norms of a new country, the family chose to look for cultural pockets in which the participant felt comfortable. From there, she could take care of the children, talk to people of similar cultural background and stay in a sheltered and non-intimidating environment for her. Her then husband was the one who went outside the cultural bubble and was the one who acquired linguistic skills in English more easily. He was busy providing for the family and working daily, while she cared for the family and the house.

Her little or no exposure to US social contexts delayed the process of acquiring English language skills in the Honduran participant. After

the breakup of their marriage, learning English and working were no longer options. Parental responsibility for raising children was complicated not only because she was alone, but also because she did not know the language. The Honduran participant said that in the United States “who does not speak English, is nobody?”. She illustrated her feelings by explaining that attending her children, providing academic support, communicating with teachers, and socializing in her children’s environment was impossible. Likewise, getting a job that paid her enough to keep the family afloat was also pretty uphill. She was forced to learn English because of the circumstances that followed her after her separation. She had to get out of her social and cultural bubble to face an unknown world in which she had lived for nine years. Finally, she had to visit her children’s schools to keep up with important requirements, communicate with teachers, and provide the support her children needed. The Honduran participant indicates that her main motivation was to be an example for her children. She subsequently enrolled in a college program to earn a degree and improve her written communication skills in English. Her children, who had already adapted to the American school system, saw in her effort an example of self-improvement and success. Today they continue their school careers in search of a professional academic degree.

### **Monolingual participants who do not work**

Two participants indicated that they currently do not work and that they do not communicate in the English language. Both have lived in the United States for more than ten years and both indicate that Spanish is their mother tongue. Both indicate that the prime reason for not venturing to work or learn English is that they prefer to dedicate themselves to their families. They tried to attend language schools to acquire English language skills, but they understood that this would take time away from their families. . Ironically, the



Salvadoran participant indicated that her ignorance of English prevented her from aiding her daughter in her academic process now that she is in school. However, both admit that learning a second language promotes personal and professional growth, and provides an essential tool for achieving work goals.

The two participants clarified that they are very uncomfortable with their inability to communicate in English, but that they can do very little because they have to attend to their families. The Cuban participant stated: "I do not feel comfortable with my knowledge of language. Now all I have to do is take my son's time to learn English, and I will not do that." For both participants, it is very difficult to operate in a strange environment when they do not know the language. They feel insecure and, as a consequence, they have limited themselves to a very closed environment in which they share only with the community and with the people of their home. They still do not see the need to learn the language, even if this prevents them from becoming more involved in their children's schools, establishing links with teachers and contributing to the academic process and school success of the children. Both depend on their husbands to move, communicate and socialize. Their livelihoods are contingent on the economic capacity that the spouses can achieve and what they can provide. They show regret because they are no longer able to help their children in school because they themselves are not academically prepared or know English. This situation is particularly difficult for the Salvadoran participant who lives in the state of Maryland, where predominantly Anglo-Saxon school systems prevail with some social and cultural pockets that correspond to the Hispanic community. The son of the Cuban participant does not show as much academic difficulty as the daughter of the Salvadoran participant because he and his family reside in Miami, Florida, where the Hispanic population and culture is enthroned through Cuban immigrants. This does not imply, however, that the child of the Cuban participant does not show academic difficulties in school,

but that, because some teachers of his son speak Spanish, she can communicate with them to know about the problems his son face. What she cannot do, because she does not have enough academic or linguistic skills, is to support the child from home to solidify the tools and support he receives in school.

## Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study is to assess how situational changes in the lives of Hispanic immigrant women can impact their environment, break their schemes and motivate them to pursue academic and linguistic goals that will benefit them and their families. More specifically, the study seeks to identify whether adult education becomes a vehicle for fostering academic excellence in children and fostering linkages between home and school. The theory establishes that greater participation or parental consortium with the school causes greater academic achievement in the children. Parents who become actively involved in their children's school activities both at home and at school, make it possible for children to adapt more quickly to the school environment and to show greater academic achievement than their counterparts. Now, in order for the parental consortium to be formed, there must be the conditions that favor it among those called to care for the minors.

In Hispanic cultures, it is mothers who bear the responsibility of raising their children. A focus on gender role assignment theories shows that Hispanic societies, because of entrenched traditions, religious morality, and military culture, encourage men to be the head of the household and provider, while the woman cares for the children and attend the daily tasks of the household. When they immigrate to the United States, these families bring with them their cultural traditions and recreate them in a social environment that is comfortable for them and where the woman is protected. It is the man who faces the unknown environment, learns the language and



integrates as quickly as possible into the work environment. This implies, however, that the woman is left behind and, perhaps, confined to the family environment. Situational and, as a consequence, social-schematic change occurs when the male figure of the family disappears. This can happen by reason of divorce, death, travel or any other reason that separates the assigned provider from the family nucleus to which he feeds and provides for. Given this new panorama, Hispanic immigrant women are forced to adopt roles that are strange to them in an environment that, because of their segregation, also finds it strange. As a consequence of this, this woman sees in her adult education a vehicle to reach goals that she could not previously reach. She values, as a result, adapting to the social environment beyond the community and learning the language of the metropolis to integrate into a work world that will allow her to provide sustenance for his family.

This study validates the situational / motivational argument and its connection with the academic consequences for underage students dependent on the participating mothers. In households where there were changes in the family environment, participants were motivated to learn English and earn a professional career. Both resources, according to them, became the vehicle to achieve greater economic stability and security in the home. While learning the language, they integrated into the world of work in a way that provided for the sustenance of their children. Both saw that this change allowed them to create very important ties with the teachers of their children that resulted in benefits for the minors. These mothers were able to provide academic support from home. This facilitated the integration of minors into the academic environment they did not know. Likewise, mothers became more participative in their children's schools, which allowed them to give more and better follow-up to their academic progress. Both affirmed that this integration served both them and minors in their respective processes of social, cultural and academic integration.

On the other hand, the participants who chose to stay at home to fulfill their feminine roles today resent not having learned English. They are happy because they were able to give their children quality of family life in the home, but they recognize that they could not give them academic support that would facilitate their integration into a school environment unknown to them. Both affirmed the importance of learning the language as adults and educating themselves independently of their age, but they agreed that it had been too late because their priority was still their family. It is important to note that in both of these cases the traditional family structure in which the man held the position of head of household and provider of household needs prevailed.

This preliminary analysis, in a certain way, shows the link between adult education and the academic success of the children. When we literate the literacy teacher, we give her the tools she needs to overcome herself and to enable her success and success of those who depend on her. The mother-home-school synergy allows children to develop in a protected environment that gives them the stability they need to integrate linguistically and academically into the school environment within the new context. The mother (and the father as well), as a model and example, to the extent that she educates and promotes her own growth and that of her children. This mother (and father) seeks to integrate into the school environment to bring the school to home and make the teacher participate in the experiences of their children. This combination promotes the growth and academic excellence so necessary in a globalized and competitive world as today.

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