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The Impact of Social Contexts on Latinx Students' Health and Education Outcomes: Family and Cultural Factors

Introduction

The Latinx proportion of the United States population has grown from 13% to 19% since 2000, reaching 62.5 million in 2021, and making up 54% of the overall population growth during that period (Zong, 2022). This underscores the requirement to better understand the unique needs and strengths associated with being an immigrant of Latin-American descent who may be facing divisive and stressful environments that undermine well-being. Environmental and acculturation stresses may negatively affect mental health, whereas positive ethnic identity and a strong value on family can be protective for Latinx youth (Robles-Ramamurthy, Sandoval, Londoño Tobón, & Fortuna, 2022).

The *Caminos* longitudinal study follows a school-based sample of Latin American-origin families in suburban Atlanta, GA during youth's transitions from early through late adolescence. In 2018, researchers began collecting survey data from 547 middle school youth and, for half of them, their mothers. Youth were selected at random from 2017-18 school enrollment lists. To date, nine time points of survey data have been collected since 2018. From 2018 – 2022, surveys were conducted with youth and mothers every six months; survey data will be collected annually through 2026 (for a total of 13 time points).

The *Caminos* project is examining how stressors and supports in youth's social environments shape family functioning and a range of indicators of adolescent health and well-being. Adolescents' mental health outcomes are measured by internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., conduct disorder, aggression, rule-breaking). Other adolescent outcomes include substance use, prosocial behaviors, and grade point average. Stressors examined include ethnic discrimination, COVID-19, and immigration threats. Supports examined include teacher, peer, and parent support. Additional factors assessed include traditional Latino cultural values as well as cultural gaps between parents and their children and between parents and the school.

The analytic approach utilized in the *Caminos* project primarily entails longitudinal, structural equation modeling techniques. These methods facilitate examining direct and indirect pathways linking extra-familial contexts with Latinx adolescent outcomes and offer a scientifically robust approach to analyzing constructs known to have measurement error. Future studies will examine chronic and acute stress measured by salivary and hair cortisol; findings from these studies will advance knowledge on biological stress processes experienced by today's U.S. Latinx adolescents. In addition, the research team is examining family, neighborhood, and youth protective factors that help mitigate risks. Findings will inform the development of preventive interventions and policies that can promote school success and healthy development for this population.

Family and Cultural Factors Tied to Latinx Students' Thriving: *What We Know*

Parents' support and understanding and parental oversight of their adolescents' behaviors consistently relate to better outcomes for teenagers.

How this research measured parenting. Supportive parenting was assessed by youth reports of experiences such as parents being understanding, warm, and loving; seeing the children's good points more than their faults; and cheering them up when they were sad or upset. Parental monitoring and oversight were measured by youth reports that parents did things such as require permission for the youth to go out on a school night; ask where the youth had been when out at night; and request that the child tell the parent what their plans were when going out with friends at night.

What the research findings reveal. While parental support appears to benefit youth throughout the adolescent years, the middle adolescent years may be a critical window of development during which youth's school performance and mental health are especially sensitive to autonomy-related parenting dynamics.

- Youth who perceive more parental support report significantly better mental health (fewer externalizing/internalizing), and better GPA (Bennett et al., 2020; Calzada et al., 2020; Nair et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2019).
- Youth who report more parental limits and behavioral control engage in less externalizing behaviors and less early alcohol use, less marijuana use, and experience fewer depressive symptoms (Calzada et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2019).
- The meaning of parental monitoring is variable depending upon the degree to which it is accompanied by conflict in the parent-adolescent relationship. The combination of high parental monitoring and low parent-adolescent conflict is most beneficial for youth's school performance and mental health. When compared to youth experiencing both high parental monitoring and low parent-adolescent conflict, youth reporting moderate levels of each experienced stronger declines in GPA. Further, among boys, experiencing high parental monitoring alongside moderately high levels of parent-adolescent conflict was associated with stronger increases in depressive symptoms.

Traditional Latino cultural values and practices are important strengths for youth.

How this research measured cultural values and practices: Youth reported on traditional cultural values including familism and respeto. Measures for these traditional values indicated youth endorsement of things such as “children should be taught that it is their duty to care for their parents when their parents get old,” “children should always do things to make their parents happy,” “when it comes to important decisions, the family should ask for advice from close relatives,” “it is important to work hard and do one’s best because this work reflects on the family,” and “children should be taught to always be good because they represent the family.” Youth also reported on cultural practices such as family assistance behaviors by reporting the number of days in a typical week in which they engaged in activities such as chores, taking care of siblings, and/or helping parents at work.

What the research findings showed. Teenagers’ endorsement of respeto and familism values tend to decrease as young people progress through the adolescent years.

- Latinx students who endorse higher levels of *familismo* values engage in more family assistance behaviors that, in turn, are associated with adolescents engaging in more “prosocial behaviors,” such as comforting others when they are upset and helping others in difficult situations (Zhao, White, & Roche, 2022).
- Latinx students who endorse higher levels of *respeto* values engage in fewer externalizing behaviors than their peers who do not endorse this cultural value to the same degree (Calzada, Roche, White, Partovi, & Little, 2020).

Parent-child acculturation differences can place a strain on the parent-child relationship, posing risks to adolescents’ well-being.

How this research measured parent-child acculturation differences. Youth reported on the degree to which they and their parents agreed on things such as the relative importance of the youth’s schoolwork versus social activities or getting a job; qualities important in choosing adolescents’ friends; what is right and wrong; what defines success; and overall values, beliefs, ideas, and opinions.

What the research findings reveal. Teens often do not endorse traditional Latino cultural values to the degree that their immigrant parents do.

- When adolescents report more acculturation differences with their parents, there is increased parent-child conflict that, in turn, is related to adolescents’ declining school performance, indicated by a lower GPA over time (Roche, Lambert, Partovi & Little, 2022).
- The cycle of declining well-being in response to parent-child acculturation differences appears to be reinforced as declines in GPA further exacerbate parent-adolescent conflict, which then leaves adolescents vulnerable to additional internalizing distress (Roche, Lambert, Partovi & Little, 2022).