

Empowering Latino Parents to Transform the Education of Their Children

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the role of parental involvement in the college preparation of Latino elementary and secondary school students. Even though literature shows that education is highly valued in Latino families, actual college enrollment rates for Latino youth are below average. This has been attributed to barriers including lack of financial resources, problems in communication with schools, and low familiarity with the college planning process. The American Dream Academy is a university outreach program, which is designed to help Latino families overcome these barriers. We conducted a qualitative analysis of speeches that were prepared and delivered by parents at graduation ceremonies of the program from 2007-2009. Our analysis revealed six themes: facing challenges, envisioning success, understanding the school system, taking ownership, community raising a child, and creating a supportive home environment. The findings enrich existing literature and help understand the complex systems that are at play with parental involvement in Latino families.

Keywords

Schools, students, teachers, multi-cultural education, urban education

Introduction

“We learned that a school system exists to benefit our children. Following the right channels, knocking on the right doors, will help us choose the correct road without many obstacles. In its place there will be a splendorous rainbow of the future that awaits our children.” (Parent-graduate in the American Dream Academy Graduation Ceremony)

Helping parents to empower themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to frame the education of their child can have a transformative impact on the future of that child. This paper reflects upon the impact of a university outreach program called the American Dream Academy (ADA), which is focused on building a bridge to higher education for a traditionally marginalized population of elementary and secondary school students in metropolitan Phoenix. Because the participants of the program are parents who are predominantly of Latin American origin, we focus the attention of this paper on the Latino population in the United States.¹

According to the 2010 census data (United States Census Bureau, 2011), the number of individuals who self-identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish in the United States exceeded 50.5 million and is the fastest growing minority group. Yet, only 31.9% of Latinos aged 18-24 enroll in college compared to their African American (38.0%), White (43.3%), and Asian (62.2%) counterparts (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). This disheartening trend has been referred to as the ‘invisible crisis’ (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004) and a ‘silent epidemic’ (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006).

¹ In this article, we use term Latino for populations of both South and Central American descent living in the United States. Depending on the literature cited we use “Latino” interchangeably with “Hispanic”. ADA staff estimates approximately 90% of their participants to be of Mexican origin. Authors’ Pre-Proof Draft of paper for personal use. All references should be made to the definitive version published in *Education and Urban Society* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013124514541464>

The school achievement gap poses a significant challenge for public policy in the United States, including Phoenix, Arizona where the ADA operates. The Phoenix metropolitan area is located in Maricopa County, which is home to the fifth largest Latino population in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). A recent report from the Morrison Institute for Public Policy (Hart & Hager, 2012) highlighted a growing educational achievement gap between Latinos and the majority population in Arizona. According to this report, “We are not preparing many of our students adequately to handle the competitive challenges of a global economy; and we are particularly failing to tap the enormous potential of Arizona’s fastest growing population group” (Hart & Hager, 2012, p. 33). These findings indicate that an inequality exists in college enrollment throughout the country. As Hill and Torres (2010) pointed out, education is traditionally highly valued in Latino families; however, many barriers stand in the way of higher college enrollment for Latino adolescents. Within the United States, many of these barriers are linked to adaptation difficulties of Latino families living in the United States. Specifically, many Latino parents lack knowledge of the school environment and awareness of the steps that need to be taken in order for their children to access higher education (Hill & Torres, 2010).

The American Dream Academy

The American Dream Academy (ADA) was developed to address the issue of low Latino college enrollment by providing parents with tools to assist their children in the pursuit of higher education. The ADA is a university outreach program delivered to parents in school settings and devoted to creating partnerships between families, schools,

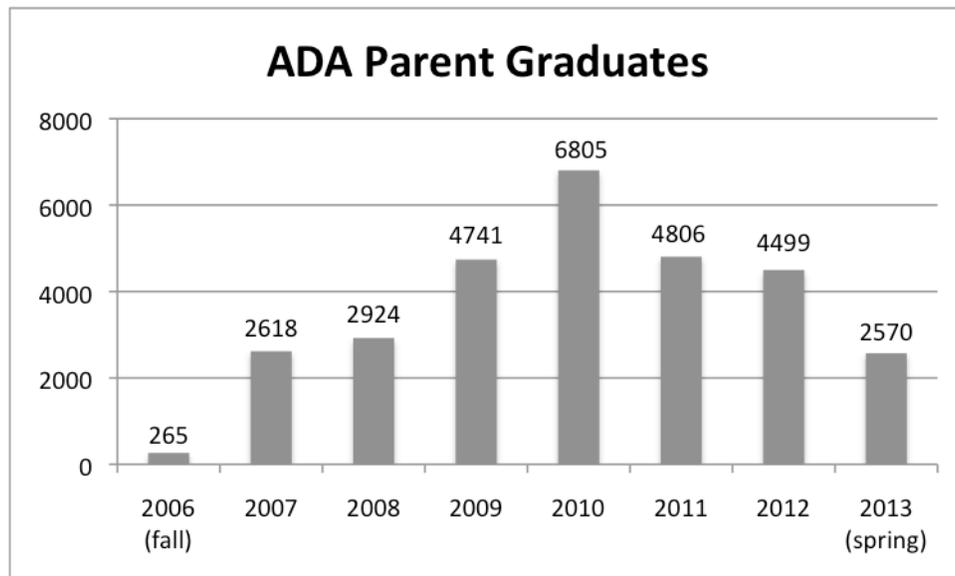
and community organizations, including Arizona State University. The goal of the ADA is to help parents in their roles as mentors and guides in their children's education. The program operates under the belief that transformative change can occur by empowering parents with the hope and tools to provide their children with the focus, guidance, and support to succeed in their academic careers and to see college as an important pathway to success. Thus, the ultimate goal of the ADA is to expand the capacities of parents to better support their children in school.

The ADA is open to those parents whose children are enrolled in the program's target schools. As a consequence of the demographics in the Phoenix metropolitan area, approximately 95% of parents that have participated in the program to date are of Latin American descent with approximately 90% of all participants being Spanish speakers and the majority being first generation immigrants to the United States. In addition, all of the schools served during the time frame for this study (2007-2009) are Title I schools, meaning that 40% or more of students in those schools live below the poverty line (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In the carrying out of its mission, the ADA relies both on five full-time employees and on a pool of approximately 120 parents from the communities where the ADA operates, who have taken a leadership role in the program as workshop facilitators and mentors.

The ADA program has been implemented in more than 190 schools and nonprofit organizations throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area. A total of 23,694 parents have graduated from the program since its inception in October of 2006. These parent-graduates have in turn influenced more than 60,000 students. A breakdown of the number

of graduates per year between 2006 and the spring of 2013 is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Numbers of parent graduates in the ADA in 2006 - 2013



Basic Tenets of the ADA Program

The ADA provides an opportunity for parents to develop their roles as advocates and supporters of their children’s educational journey. Between 2007-2009, the ADA utilized a curriculum developed by the nonprofit Parent Institute of Quality Education.² During those years, interested parents attended nine weekly 90 minute long classes comprising of an information session, six lessons, a meeting with the school’s principal

² The PIQE curriculum for middle and high schools was based on the same principles in 2007-2009. Since 2010, the ADA has been using a different curriculum called *Realizing the American Dream* (RAD), which was designed by the Parent Institute (a different nonprofit). While the class format and the topic discussed in PIQE and RAD are similar, the main difference, according to ADA staff is that the RAD curriculum is research-based.

and a graduation ceremony. The six PIQE lessons are listed in Table 1. Parents learned how to navigate the public school system, understand academic requirements, effectively communicate with teachers and school staff, develop a positive home learning environment, and support children’s social and emotional development. The benefits of spending time with children and motivating them on their academic journey were emphasized, as was the notion that ‘it takes a community to raise a child’.

Table 1

Parent Institute for Quality Education Curriculum: Elementary School

Lesson	Title	Content
1	Home School Collaboration	Influences of the home, school, and community environments on the child; significance of parent-school collaboration; resources for parents;
2	Home Motivation and Self Esteem	Ways how parents can strengthening their child’s self-esteem
3	Communication and Discipline	Understanding discipline as a way of guiding the child; enhancing communication in the family and with school
4	Academic Standards / Reading	Understanding academic standards as a tool to help children attend college; working with the child’s teacher
5	How the School System Functions	Overview of main tests, sources of funding, and their practical application
6	The Road to College	The advantages of attending a university; preparing for college and meeting all requirements; financial aid

Source: ASU Center for Community Development and Civil Rights (n.d.)

Participation in the ADA program concludes with the graduation ceremony. Parents, children, school administrators and teachers, and various other community members attend the graduations. For many of the parents, this is the first time they have graduated from any academic program. During the ceremony, parent participants receive a Program Completion Certificate. They are also given a Certificate of Conditional Admission to Arizona State University and a specially crafted ‘future ASU’ student ID card for each of their children. While the Certificate and the ID card do not provide any entitlements for college Application, they symbolize the trust and hope that their children will ultimately get accepted to Arizona State University. A commencement speech is given by one of the parent-graduates selected by peers from each cohort to summarize their learning experience and the influence of the program on their families’ college planning process. The parents prepare their speeches on their own, which means that their testimonies provide a unique insight into what lessons from the ADA program resonated with them most and were in turn internalized through their own experiences.

In spite of the importance of university outreach programs in helping to reduce education gaps among Latino youth, it is yet unclear how parents perceived the program, and the extent to which it addresses the complex interplay of systems that influence the propensity of Latino parents to be actively involved in their children’s education. Given the significance of parent roles in children’s educational aspirations, it is important to understand what parents themselves identify as key issues as they reflect on their parental role. In response to this need, we have identified one primary research question to guide our study: What do participants highlight as lessons learned as a result of their

participation in the ADA program? We address this question by analyzing the testimonies given by parents graduating from the program.

Review of Literature

This article builds on an emerging body of literature pertaining to Latino college enrollment in the United States. Smith (2008) posits that research on this topic has to refuse an *assimilationist* perspective, which has historically argued that low school and college achievement of Latinos are based on the students' inability to accept the values, morals, and ethics of American culture. Differences from the mainstream were construed as a deficit, and under this rubric, Latino parents were labeled 'uncaring' or 'uninvolved' in the formation of educational aspirations of their children (Hill & Torres, 2010; Ramirez, 2003). This assimilationist approach has been countered by proponents of a second approach, described as the *critical* framework (Smith, 2008). This approach acknowledges the differential starting position of Latino immigrant families (especially of Mexican origin), who lack *critical capital* including knowledge about the college application process (Auerbach, 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002). The critical framework highlights the role of the family in college preparations and assumes that Latino parents do in fact perceive education as a valuable asset for their children (Auerbach, 2006; Hill & Torres, 2010; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009). Additionally, the premise of literature emanating from this perspective is that Latino cultures themselves have intrinsic educational assets and dispositions that can be capitalized upon to influence the proclivity of its youth to seek higher education experiences (Auerbach, 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Valencia & Black, 2002).

Benefits of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement has in large part been found to positively correlate with student academic achievement (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Rodriguez, 2002; Rosado & Aaron, 1991; Trusty et al., 2003). However, indications of weak (Reynolds, 1992), or even negative correlations in the case of some parental standard setting (Natriello & McDill, 1986) exist as well. These discrepancies can be explained by incoherent definitions of parental involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001), and by not controlling for prior educational results (Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). Moreover, as was shown by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 2005), the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement is being influenced by other variables: parents' motivation to engage, forms of involvement, learning techniques used by parents and their children's perceptions of these techniques, and the children's personal characteristics, which can help them succeed (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1995, 2005; The Parent Institute, 2012).

Traditionally, involvement has been operationalized as behaviors such as attending parent-teacher conferences, checking homework, helping with homework, and volunteering in schools (Domina, 2005). Together with various fundraising events, this formal parental involvement has defined the normative image of a good parent interested in the educational achievement of their children (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; López, 2001). However, parents of Latin American origin are commonly engaged in their child's education through informal forms of involvement (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012). For example, in his dissertation, Treviño (2000) showed how parents of high achieving students in

Mexican-origin migrant families living in Texas created a supportive home environment for education and promoted values of respect, pride, and a sense of ownership. Similarly, López (2001) found parents of Mexican origin instill values of resilience, perseverance, and hard work in their children. More recently, Kiyama (2010) described how *funds of knowledge* (i.e., bodies of knowledge and skills in a household that have accumulated over time) in Mexican-American families develop educational ideologies, such as college aspirations, through social networks and cultural symbols. In spite of the differences between formal and informal parental involvement techniques, LeFevre and Shaw (2012) found both forms to be positively related to student achievement.

Barriers to College Enrollment

Research suggests that there are barriers that undermine the capacity for Latino parents for facilitating their children's progress toward college enrollment. First, a lack of financial resources influences a family's ability to support their children at various stages of educational development. Turney and Kao (2009) found that socio-economic factors, including financial resources, mediated parental involvement in their children's elementary school education on the one hand, and race and immigrant status on the other hand. Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 determined that 8th grade students who came from middle-income families were benefiting more from their parents' communication with schools than students from low-income families (Desimone, 1999). The college environment itself can exacerbate the operational effects of financial barriers. For instance, Smith (2008) determined that college personnel often treat parents of lower socio-economic status with disrespect.

Financial barriers are also linked to the issue of undocumented populations. Abrego's (2006) qualitative study of the children of working-class Latino immigrants in Los Angeles concluded that without citizenship or residency status, many excellent Latino secondary school students could not apply for financial aid to pay for college. Her research further revealed that many of these students lose their motivation for advancing their studies and transition into low-paying vocations.

For many immigrant parents, their lack of proficiency in the dominant language has a negative influence on their ability to be involved with their children's school (Turney & Kao, 2009). In this context, Auerbach (2004) recommended that schools should be able to communicate with Latino parents both in English and Spanish to help parents overcome this barrier.

School communication barriers appear to be particularly compounding for minority immigrant populations in the United States, with these challenges emerging during the earliest encounters with the educational system (Turney & Kao, 2009). Delgado-Gaitan (1994) suggests that the capacity to have good communication with teachers and school officials is a cultural phenomenon. An analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study data from 2001 revealed that foreign-born Latinos were 2.5 times more likely than native-born Whites to report that they did not feel welcome at their child's elementary school (Turney & Kao, 2009). Ramirez (2003) found that Latino parents from California claimed to have experienced difficulties when they tried to obtain information from teachers about their children's academic performance. He also found that parents felt teachers did not fully respect their children's cultural background or

make efforts to organize bilingual parent meetings. He concluded that a bridging of the school-home gap was needed to improve relationships with Latino families (Ramirez, 2003). Though these findings may not be generalized to all schools, they provide evidence that certain forms of discrimination take place in terms of managing school communication challenges.

The literature also suggests that many Latino parents – especially those who recently immigrated to the United States – find it difficult to understand aspects of the U.S. education system (Hill & Torres, 2010). Drawing from an ethnographic case study at a diverse Los Angeles area high school, Auerbach (2006) concluded that many Latino parents live in an ecocultural niche and are dependent on their children to mediate contact with U.S. institutions.

However, this may be mitigated with increased familiarity of the U.S. education system. For example, Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (1997, 2007) found a positive relationship between higher levels of acculturation and college enrollment by Mexican-Americans. Moreover, parents with experience in higher education tend to have children who also seek experience in higher education – likely speaking to the power of familiarity with processes and systems as a force that formulates the interest of their children in higher education (Crosnoe, 2001).

Parental Educational Aspirations

In Latino cultures, education is commonly valued and viewed as a mechanism to prosper economically (Auerbach, 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002). Parents play a pivotal role in shaping college aspirations for their children (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Kimura-

Walsh et al., 2009). For instance, in a qualitative study of Mexican-American families, daughters perceived their mothers to be instrumental in shaping their educational aspirations (Hernandez, Vargas-Lew, & Martinez, 1994). In other studies, educational aspirations provided for positive academic results (Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Yan & Lin, 2005). For example, Yan and Lin (2005) found parental educational expectations to be the strongest predictor of mathematic achievement for Latino students.

Cultural Aspects of Parenting

When parental involvement is defined in the context of expectations of the dominant American culture, parents who do not follow these expectations may be perceived as uninvolved (Hill & Torres, 2010; Ramirez, 2003). However, this inference may be rooted in a false premise: it may mean that important culture-specific forms of parental involvement are not being acknowledged. Latino cultures contain numerous forms of support for education that might not be understood by those managing educational delivery systems (Auerbach, 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Rodriguez, 2002; Smith, 2008). According to Auerbach (2006), “Educators need to honor the many ways that Latino immigrant parents are already involved in the education of their children” (p. 290). Though lacking knowledge of the college preparation process and connections with schools – Latino families are rich in *moral capital*, which is Auerbach’s term for the message of strict work ethics, studying and staying on the right path. Specifically, as pointed out by Delgado-Gaitan (1994), Latino children receive pieces of nurturing advice – *consejos* – from their parents. De la Piedra (2010) discovered that Latino parents perceived oral narratives and words of advice as a supplement to

homework support, which they were not able to provide to their children. In the same study, vernacular literacy also proved to be an effective way of acquiring education.

With the literature review in mind, we now turn to our analysis of RAD graduation speeches and to the research question: What do participants highlight as lessons learned in the program?

Methods

To answer the research question, a total of 258 parent testimonies representing a pool of 8,847 participants delivered in ADA graduations between 2007 and 2009 were analyzed.³ The speeches were prepared and delivered by program participants and therefore they provide unique insights about what participants see as key lessons learned.

The speeches were transcribed and translated by the ADA staff, where needed, from Spanish to English. As a prelude to the preparation of the testimonies, ADA staff asked each cohort of parent participants to select a representative to discuss their experience with the program and its relevance to their involvement in their children's education.

We employed an inductive approach to the analysis in order to extract underlying themes within the parent's graduation speeches. Our analysis utilized a multi-stage process. First, a combination of initial coding (Charmaz, 2006) and holistic coding (Saldaña, 2009) was employed by three researchers independently, from which each came up with a set of provisional codes and themes. One member of the research team used shorthand devices to separate, label, and organize the data into 21 initial codes that provided the basis for conceptualizing six initial themes. Next, another member of the

³ The number of analyzed speeches by year is 11 in 2007, 99 in 2008, and 148 in 2009.

research team, working independently, used NVivo 9 software (QSR International, 2010) to selectively code the data coming up with 35 codes that were then categorized into four major themes. Lastly, a third researcher (the lead investigator) peer-reviewed the codes and open coded the speeches using NVivo 10 software (QSR International, 2012), yielding 37 codes grouped into 11 thematic areas.

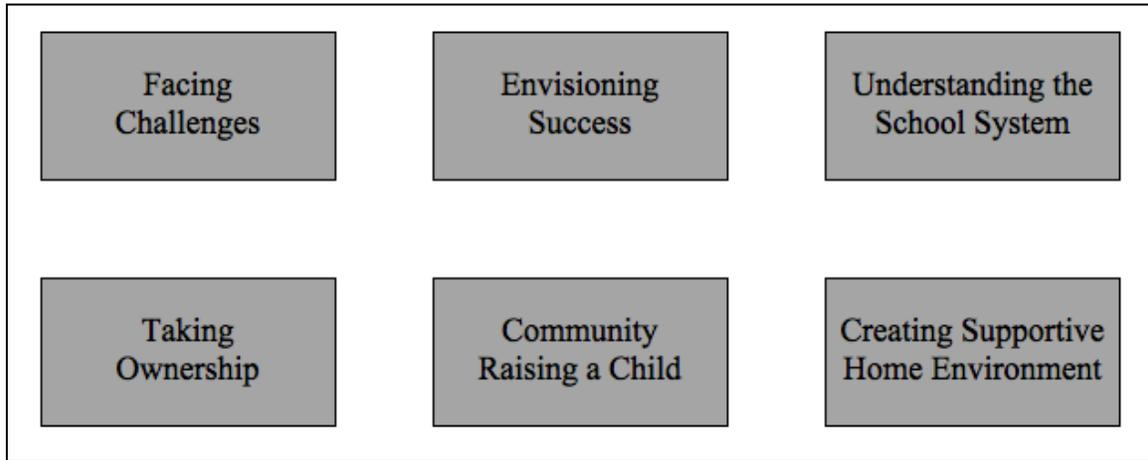
Trustworthiness of the study was achieved by observer triangulation, peer debriefing, and member-checking (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). As mentioned, the research team used three independent rounds of coding. The codes were examined as part of peer-debriefing procedures, in which six themes were agreed upon based on the alignment of the three individual rounds of analysis. To further validate the findings, a representative of the ADA carefully reviewed this article based and provided feedback based on his own experience in managing ADA programs.

Discussion and Findings

Our analysis of the graduation speeches provides insight on what parents graduating from the university outreach program see as key aspects of their ability to guide their children to success in school and life.

In the final analysis, six core themes were revealed: facing challenges, envisioning success, understanding the school system, taking ownership, community raising a child, and creating a supportive home environment. They are shown in Figure 2. The essence of each theme is explored in the discussion that follows. The discussion is embedded with selected direct quotes from the parent testimonies that serve as exemplars of the full dimensionality of each theme.

Figure 2
Themes that emerged in the analysis



Facing Challenges

Graduating parents experienced challenges in parenting that reflect challenges noted in other studies (Auerbach, 2004; Desimone, 1999; Turney & Kao, 2009). Coming from immigrant families, parent graduates spoke to the need to overcome hardships such as lack of financial resources, insufficient knowledge of educational system, and language barriers. The first theme captures these daily struggles and challenges parents and their families have to overcome. Two spheres of challenges were identified: challenges faced by their children during adolescence; and, challenges faced by parents personally as they move through the parenting process. Both spheres were typically discussed in very general terms. One parent's testimony serves as an excellent exemplar of such generality in the first sphere: "Our kids face obstacles every day, let's face it, they are growing up in a tough environment." While a few of the graduates mentioned children's challenges in schools, none were described in great detail.

In their testimonies, parents placed greater emphasis on the challenges they faced themselves. In general, parenting itself was frequently characterized as overwhelming. According to one, “Our role as parents is not an easy one.” Specific obstacles included lack of knowledge of the U.S. educational system, and language barriers, both of which can be partly explained by the concept of ecocultural niches, in which, according to Auerbach (2006) immigrant parents often find themselves.

Some parents stressed that economic hardships prevent them from supporting their children’s education financially: “My husband and I struggled as I imagine most who are here have done, work picking fruit in season, earning the minimum wage in California.” Working late hours also put obstacles in the way of some parents to attend children’s class activities such as a school reunion event.

One parent reflected on the political matters surrounding immigration, noting the toughening immigration laws as being negative: “We came to this country because we had a dream to give our children a better life. Every day that dream is harder to reach because the immigration laws are becoming very difficult.”

Envisioning Success

The ability of parents to see into the future and envision their children’s success emerged as the second theme. Despite some daunting obstacles facing parents and their children, the message was strong that parents were willing to make sacrifices: “I know it seems like a high price to pay right now. Or, you feel you have just too much to get done. But isn’t your future and your child’s future worth it.” Findings from this study support the notion that Latino parents do value education, as was highlighted, among others, by

López (2001) and Valencia and Black (2002), and are willing to make sacrifices in order to enable their children to reach success in life.

Parents framed aspirations for their children in the notion of the American dream and often spoke of personal responsibility to help children succeed. “The American dream is not just about owning a house in this country, but through helping our children meet their academic goals now so they can accomplish their goals in the future.” Two inter-connected sub-themes captured parental aspirations for their children that were expressed during the ADA graduations. The first pertained to their children’s search for a successful role in society: “We have the obligation as parents of supporting our children in their education so they desire of being someone great in life, and we would be so proud of them.” Other comments indicated that parents wanted to see their children take leadership positions – both in society generally and within the Latino community in particular. One testimony included the observation that “The biggest learning we get from this program of the American Dream Academy is to give our children the opportunity to follow the path of the University being the best leaders and Hispanic representatives in this country.”

The second sub-theme reflected the parent’s valuation of education as a pathway to success. This awareness was evident in the testimony of a parent, who said, “We understand that the only safe road that our children should take is the one that will take them to the University to have a better life.” Another parent made a more general observation: “Education is the best tool to confront whatever circumstance in life.”

The importance of education as a pathway to individual and societal prosperity

was pinpointed in the reports *Dropped?* (Hart & Hager, 2012) and *Losing our Future* (Orfield et al., 2004). The graduation speeches also validate the existence of a pro-education attitude in Latino families, discussed in the studies of Auerbach (2004), Kiyama (2010), López (2001), and Treviño (2002), and summarized in Valencia and Black (2002).

Understanding the School System

The speeches revealed that graduating parents learned valuable lessons about the U.S. educational system and specific ways how to navigate opportunities in school to best help their children. According to the parents, the program empowered them in two main ways. First, it provided them with understanding of academic requirements: “I learned about the school system and how we can look at their standardized test results. I know what State test they will be taking and in what grades.” The program also helped create an awareness of how school requirements affect one’s opportunities in life. As one parent put it, “I knew maintaining a good G.P.A. was beneficial but was not aware of extended importance and how your G.P.A. can be used throughout your lifetime and there are even some employers who consider this in the hiring process.” The speeches thus supported claims by, among others, Hill and Torres (2010) that lack of information prevents parents from being fully immersed in their children’s education. They also align with the findings of Turney and Kao (2009) and Ramirez (2003) that immigrant families struggle with communicating with their schools.

The second form of empowerment centered on creating awareness of resources that exist to help them and gaining particular insights on how to access them. For

example, one parent shared, “This program opens our eyes to financial aid showing us that there are no limits for our children to reach their academic success.” There was a general sense that knowledge of resources is inextricably tied to creating power in action. As stated in a testimony, “Today, the system implemented by the American Dream Academy has given us hope and the will to keep fighting, to set short- and long-term goals, to keep knocking on doors until they open, and the dream of every parent for their children becomes a reality.”

Taking Ownership

The theme ‘taking ownership’ provided another dimension to the communication between the parents and their children’s school. Graduating parents emphasized the need for them to take a more active part in their children’s education and not wait for school to do it for them. The testimonies revealed that parents’ experience in the program triggered a demonstrated change in parental roles – a transition into the mode of taking responsibility. In the words of one parent, “If we want to be successful in this country, we have to prepare our kids to be eagles, to start flying so they can reach the University...” This taking of ownership was evident in families in Treviño’s research (2000), where he described how parents of high-achieving immigrant students were providing both material and non-material resources to their children in the hopes of advancing their achievement of higher education goals.

Parents acknowledged their desire to help their children. One stated, “I believe that the desire of every mother and father is that their children are able to achieve a better life than they did.” Another parent challenged a cultural stereotype about responsibility:

“As a Hispanic, there are many times that we have the bad reputation of not being interested in the education of our children. This is not what I say!”

Many parents shifted their thinking about the distribution of responsibilities between themselves and their children’s schools. One father mentioned, “As a first time dad, I thought my job was to send my kid to school, and check his homework, but that the real responsibility was the teachers’ and the school’s.” This sentiment was captured in the words of one parent who highlighted the importance of the parents’ role: “I am my child’s first teacher, as well as their advocate. I need to be the voice for my children to make sure their needs are being heard and being met.”

There is a general lack of research on increasing a sense of ownership in the literature focusing on university outreach programs and Latino parents. In one of the few available studies, Downs, Martin, Fossum, Martinez, Solorio, and Martinez (2008) described how sense of ownership increased among Latino parents who led outreach programs. However, it is unclear how sense of ownership increases in programs where parents do not lead the programs. What is known from the general sense of ownership literature is that sense of ownership is predicated on power and empowerment (Lachapelle, 2008), two elements that were highlighted in the graduate speeches of the program.

Community Raising a Child

Some parents also discussed the need to seek help and resources in the wider community. Parents revealed that the ADA experience prompted them to recognize the need for interaction and collaboration with their children’s school and with the broader

community: “As the courses went on, I came to a realization that IT DOES TAKE COMMUNITY TO RAISE A CHILD. A community consists of parents, families, libraries, schools, counselors etc.” [Emphasis in the original transcript] Parents were quite specific in describing what they learned about how to communicate with the school community. In the words of one parent, “There are so many things that we have learned like how we must be aware of our children because the most powerful force in their education is when parents and teachers work together.” Another put it this way: “The program taught me how very critical it is to develop and maintain a strong relationship with my child’s counselor to ensure they were working in tandem with me to prepare my child for college.”

The need to become proactive with the broader community was discussed in more general terms: “It is important that as parents we are united with the school and the community to a good academic education of our children.” Another parent stated, “Upon completing this program we will leave knowing there is a partnership between the home, the school and the community.”

While the notion that ‘It takes a community to raise a child’ was present in many of the graduation speeches, the discussion of specific instances of such discussion was mostly confined to communication between parents and schools. None of the parents provided examples of how they would seek outside help in other community organizations such as neighborhood associations or faith-based organizations. This finding reveals some disconnect between what parents learned in the program and the rich literature on family-school-community partnerships (Epstein, 2011), and asset based

community development (McKnight & Block, 2010), and could provide the basis for further program development.

Creating a Supportive Home Environment

The last theme captures the parents' references to their insights about the need to support their children at home. They talked about practical ways of being involved in their children's education in the home environment. Parents spoke to their newfound awareness of the use of positive, encouraging communication: "If we see our children as successful individuals with a high self-esteem they will be that in the future." They also learned the importance of demonstrating trust in abilities of their children: "We must believe in our children so they can trust us, when the family is together they can easily overcome any obstacles."

The program helped parents improve their communication with children: "If there's something I'll never forget is that children are always watching and listening to what we say." Parents were also able to raise and communicate their expectations: "From the time our children start school, going to college and achieving goals should be discussed not in terms of 'if', but in terms of 'when'." In the words of one exuberant parent: "Parents, we are all shooting to the stars for a 4.0 or higher!"

Parents explained that their lessons learned regarding the creation of discipline were important for their children's future academic success. One parent exclaimed, "We learned to establish boundaries and rules at home they taught us about the difference between positive and negative discipline, and many other things."

Others described how they started to encourage their children to work on

homework and read more often. One parent explained how this influenced the entire family: “We didn’t go to the library before due to the lack of time, but now we make time because [the children] keep asking us to go.” The same parent also mentioned, “It is very important that we as parents put into place the suggestions received in every class, such as: supporting our children in the home with their homework...”

Lastly, the experience in the program has led parents to show appreciation for what their children do in their free time: “I learned how very important it is to help my child be a well-rounded student by participating in sports, extra-curricular activities, volunteer activities or having a part-time job.”

Parents highlighted both hands-on as well as moral support. Both fall under the category ‘informal parent involvement’ as discussed by LeFevre and Shaw (2012). This theme also ties into the studies by Rodriguez (2002) and Trusty et al. (2003), which showed a positive relationship between parents’ encouragement and their children’s school results.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, we analyzed 258 American Dream Academy graduation speeches from years 2007-2009. Themes that emerged in the speeches add to existing literature by providing an understanding of what participants in a parent-empowerment program identify as key aspects of parent involvement. Since the parents prepared the speeches on their own, their testimonies provide unique insights about (1) what participants internalized as key lessons learned and (2) how they interpreted these lessons within their own life narratives. To be true, the two are interconnected. Furthermore, we do not have

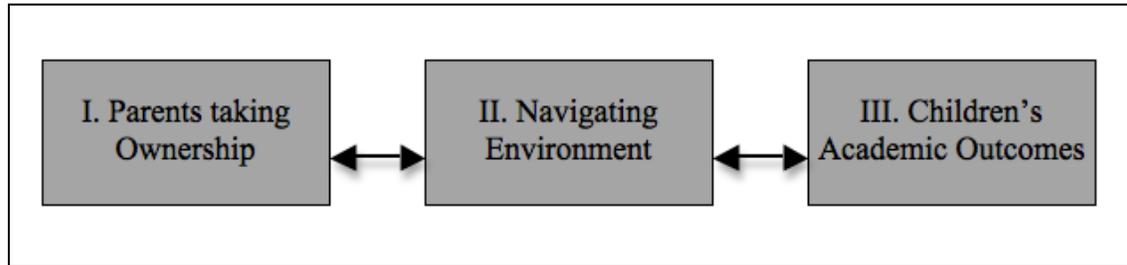
data on the attitudes, knowledge and skills, which parents already held before they decided to participate in the ADA. Despite these limitations, our study provides unique insights about what most resonated with the parents as they were trying to navigate themselves and their children through the complex circumstances of college preparations. This is particularly pertinent given the barriers shown in the literature review that Latino students in general face in the American educational system.

Our study validates a prevailing view in the literature that Latino parents are indeed personally invested in their children's education, but often find it difficult to orient themselves in the U.S. educational system. For these reasons, programs such as the American Dream Academy fill the gap in resources that are available to Latino parents.

The findings of this paper provide a conceptual map for understanding the environment, in which Latino parents can be involved, formally and informally, in their children's education. The six themes can help practitioners to identify key dimension of education programs for Latino parents. More research, however, is needed to understand the relationship between these themes.

Two areas, in particular, deserve further attention. First is the role of culture in the process of ADA parents-participants' adaptation to the U.S. educational system. Second, a more thorough analysis is needed to understand the relationship between immigrant parents, the environment (home, school, and community settings) through which they navigate as they guide their children, and the outcomes of their efforts. The three components are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Further Research



In line with the research by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 2005), we propose that the following questions continue to be investigated in future studies:

- (1) How does the school and community environment influence parents' propensity to be involved in their children's education?
- (2) How can programs such as the ADA benefit from deeply understanding these relationships?

The testimonies of parents graduating from the program indicated important relationships between parents, schools, and, their communities, which need to be investigated further. In order to gain further insights, future studies would benefit from data collected during in-depth interviews and focus groups in settings other than the graduation ceremonies. While this study focused on parents who are already committed to being involved in their children's education, evident by their participation in the program, future studies might explore the views of parents prior to participating as well.

We conclude this article with a quote from one of the program's participants. The quote captures the prevailing impact of the program for a population experiencing the

challenges of navigating systems not inherently designed for its needs:

“One of my favorite icons is the lighthouse. A lighthouse is designed to give mariners guidance through the storms that arise and it is a beacon to avoid running ashore. The Dream Academy has been like that for us. It has been a guide through the fog of confusion and ignorance that cause many parents to become dissuaded from participating in our child’s education and development.”

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