

Educational and Mothering Discourses and Learner Goals: Mexican Immigrant Women Enacting Agency in a Family Literacy Program

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Key Findings

Family literacy programs promote certain ideas about literacy and parenting. This study examined how Mexican immigrant women in a family literacy program used mainstream ideas, or discourses, of mothering and parent involvement in education to pursue their own personal and academic goals. The findings revealed that women were at times faced with the dilemma of choosing between Mexican ideas about mothering and those embedded in the family literacy program. However, they also used family literacy discourses to justify their educational pursuits, gain power and prestige in their nuclear and extended families, work toward more equitable gender relationships in the home, set goals, expand their identity, and participate in mainstream society. Furthermore, participation in family literacy classes helped to support their children's academic success. Lastly, participants combined U.S. and Mexican discourses to reflect their ideas of good mothering and demonstrate their mothering abilities.

Key Implications

This study suggests that practitioners should identify how societal norms concerning mothering and literacy shape family literacy programming, teaching, and their understandings of learners. This study helps identify how learners use these discourses to expand their identities, take advantage of new opportunities, and achieve goals. These immigrant mothers actively used academic and social knowledge (tacit knowledge constructed through community and personal experiences) to make decisions or set goals, indicating that program and learner goals need to be aligned. These findings can assist curriculum developers and teachers to align class content to learner goals and identify benefits and conflicts for learners in achieving stated program goals.

Viewing adult learners as having to interact in a variety of settings (e.g., school, home, public institutions, workplace) can help practitioners determine what tools learners use or need to negotiate educational opportunities and societal expectations. Chiefly, this means including learners in decision making about curricula and other programmatic matters. Furthermore, explicitly teaching and discussing social norms could enable learners to make more informed decisions about how they interact in their new U.S. communities and to understand how mainstream U.S. discourses might

conflict with their own cultural discourses. Classroom discussions on these topics may clarify apparent contradictions such as learners wanting to advance their education to support their children, but missing classes to stay home with their husband.

Introduction

This study examined how Mexican immigrant women enrolled in a family literacy program used mainstream ideas of mothering and parent involvement in education to pursue their own personal and academic goals. Like other adult learners (Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005), these mothers appropriated dominant parenting and educational discourses in the U.S. to justify furthering their education, to support their future goals, to create new identities, and to demonstrate their mothering abilities. Participants negotiated multiple identities such as mother, wife, and woman by combining discourses of raising a literate child and being a good mother. At other times these identities conflicted with achieving some of their goals. The study offers adult education scholars and practitioners alternative ways of understanding learners, their goals, and pathways to achieving these goals.

Literature Review

Research indicates that educational programs convey norms and ideas about topics such as schooling, identity, and parenting behaviors (Foucault, 1980; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). These discourses shape how educators view learners and their goals, views that may or may not adequately reflect learners' own identities and purposes. Dominant discourses create possibilities for who one is and can be, in part by structuring ways of participating in society (e.g., marriage) and institutional offerings (e.g., educational programs, Gore, 1997). Many family literacy programs draw on individualistic, White, middle- and upper-class discourses of literacy and parenting. For instance, the "literate being" (Cook-Gumperz, 2006) discourse emphasizes school-based literacy practices, while the Good Mother (Gadsen, 2004)

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is depicted as sacrificing her needs to nurture her child cognitively, emotionally, and materially (Griffith & Smith, 2005). Because these ideas are so pervasive and taken-for-granted, they may lead programs to inadvertently instruct poor women and women of color in “proper” parenting (Gadsen, 2004). However, people have the capacity to enact agency, meaning that we can envision and express our identity and take actions to achieve our desires and goals (Meyers, 2002) within the constraints of dominant discourses and social structures (Ahearn, 2001), including family literacy programs that promote specific ideals of mothering and literacy. The concept of agency recognizes that women actively use and respond to the ideas they encounter in educational sites. It is important to study how societal discourses are embedded in literacy programs and how they can support or hinder learners from achieving their goals.

Methods

This brief addresses the following questions: How does participation in a family literacy program shape the ways in which Mexican immigrant women enact agency? How do these women use, negotiate, or disrupt mothering and literacy discourses to establish distinctions or connections between themselves and the ideals promoted in their family literacy program?

The study used a narrative inquiry methodology with a case study design to highlight the voices and self-representations of participants (Riessman, 2008). The participants—five native Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrant mothers—were enrolled in an Even Start family literacy program in the southwestern U.S. The women had lived in the United States from six to 20 years, had completed six to 12 years of schooling, and had attended family literacy classes for six months to five years.

The author conducted multiple life history interviews (four to six per person) focusing on the women’s past and current educational experiences, their role as mothers, and their hopes for themselves and their children. Additional data sources included observation of parent education classes and parent-child interactive literacy activities and analysis of program documents. Interview transcripts were read and analyzed for narratives concerning literacy, motherhood, education, desires, and the meanings attributed to education (Riessman, 2008). Narratives were compared to prevalent programmatic and societal discourses to see how participants resisted, contradicted, or used them to support their identities and goals.

Appropriating aspects of the U.S.-based mothering role opened up possibilities for more power, different kinds of engagement in the family, and re-envisioning of the self for these mothers.

Findings

The narratives demonstrate how participants appropriated the U.S. Good Mother discourse and educational opportunities to achieve personal and

educational goals, to seek more equitable relationships in their homes, to fend for themselves in mainstream settings, and to support their children in school.

Using Good Mother and Literacy Discourses to Justify Educational Pursuits

The women maintained that to fulfill their role as children’s main source of academic support, they needed to continue their education. They related stories about how they contributed to their child’s school-based success, overtly claiming the need to persist in their own education to keep up with and support their children’s learning. The women correlated their learning with their child’s success. For instance, Nelli (pseudonym) said, “Right now I am study math in the GED book. I can help him [6th grade son], too,” and Carmen explained that she finds her old schoolwork to help her work with her son. Due to their involvement in adult education, all the women identified themselves as the family member who could best assist children with homework and thus raise literate children.

All but one participant encountered resistance from their husbands regarding their school-based activities. Yesmenia recounted:

He wants me to be there [at home] with him, but I can’t. I tell him, ‘I can’t miss school, either.’ I know that’s [her ability to help her son in school] why he likes me to go [to school] ... He already told me, ‘Stop going to school’ and I told him, ‘If I can’t go it is your fault...’ [author translation]

Yesmenia did not contest her husband’s control or the family structure; rather, she argued that her learning helped her to be a Good Mother by raising a literate child. That is, she justified her educational pursuits by appropriating both the Literacy and Good Mother discourse. Yesmenia’s husband ultimately supported her return to school.

Gaining Power and Prestige

The women’s narratives revealed that their education gave them power and prestige in their families. They became seen as the formal knowledge keepers in the family, as Nelli related: “He [husband] speaks English, but when he has to write, he asks me how to write or ... he asks me if I believe it is good. For this reason I feel good because I can help my children and I can help my husband and I can help me.” This role extended beyond the nuclear family, since the women were seen as role models for others.

Helping Their Children to be Academically Successful

Participants viewed their own education as key to enabling their children to stay in school and attend college, a goal all the women had for their children. Nelli explained, “If the mother is more educated, I think that [we] have other kind of ideas and then we can tell them that they have to study. They have to go to the college.” In sum, the mothers framed their education as vital to supporting their children’s academic persistence.

The women used family literacy parenting and educational discourses—within cultural, social, and material constraints—to achieve their desires as women, mothers, and wives.

Combining U.S. and Mexican Discourses to Create a More Appropriate Idea of Mother

All five participants used and expanded the mainstream U.S. Good Mother discourse to demonstrate their mothering abilities. To this discourse they added Mexican beliefs about *educación*, a model of social, moral, and academic development that guides Latinos/as' childrearing and parental involvement in education (Reese et. al., 1995). For example, Nelli said, "I have to take the good from the American culture and the good from my culture and mix them together so that my children be better in life."

Contrary to prior studies showing that Latino parents emphasize children's behavior when discussing their education with professionals (Greenfield et. al., 1998) the women also mentioned academic topics such as enrollment in gifted programs and knowledge of the school system. By stressing moral and social development in concert with cognitive development and academic success, the women added their own ideas of mothering to the mainstream discourse, creating what, in their eyes, was a more appropriate and higher standard of mothering. This finding challenges the stereotype of the passive Mexican immigrant mother who is uninvolved in her child's school life (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Working toward More Equitable Gender Relationships

Similar to prior research (Hirsch, 2007), participating in classes and U.S. society seemed to increase participants' desire for more equitable relationships in the home. Carmen, for example, narrated how she presented her labor in the home as on a par with her husband's job. Guadalupe attempted to build equity into child care responsibilities, stating that she was capable of attending parent-teacher conferences and helping with schoolwork, but needed her husband to be involved: "They are his children...Yesterday I left my own work to help them and he was just sitting there. It's not fair and this is why I want him to be involved." Here she presented herself as a literate person and a good mother, but she appealed to fairness and duty in explaining why her husband should engage with his children.

Moving into Mainstream Society

The women reported that the English language skills acquired through family literacy classes helped them counter rude store personnel, navigate systems such as doctor's appointments and schools, and interview and be hired for jobs, thereby asserting their right to be recognized as part of mainstream society. They attributed their ability to engage in school conferences and other school-based communication and activities to their learning. Nelli remarked:

I feel more sure about myself. ... I can talk with the teachers of my children and I feel better because when I didn't know nothing English I have to call someone to translate the conversation. And right now I can talk with my children teacher, by myself. ... I can express what I think. ... I feel better, I am more prepared. ... I think is for myself, for my person.

Using an Expanded Identity to Inform and Set Goals

Participants also utilized parenting and academic education to craft an expanded sense of self that incorporated new goals and greater self-esteem and sense of power. Attending family literacy classes supported participants' future goals. Each emphasized how she would use education to fulfill personal goals such as becoming a librarian, secretary, English language teacher, business owner, or college student. Furthermore, as role models, these mothers wanted to expand current employment options (e.g., housekeeping) for themselves and their children. Carmen shared, "We can teach our family about how important is education and if we want to work, we can get a better job not like a housework. You see if I have my GED diploma I could get more easy a job." Yet, they kept their goals within the Good Mother discourse, stating that they would pursue these goals during school hours or wait until their children were grown.

Finally, the women used the family literacy setting to expand their identities to include roles beyond the home, ones that contrasted with the identities of mothers in Mexico. Carmen stated that in Mexico, women

only stay at home and take care of the children and cook and take care of husband and here [U.S.] I think it is different because we ... can do something for ourselves too. ... We can take more education and get a job. ... If I feel good I think all of my family gonna feel good, too.

This quote illustrates how women linked the benefits of expanded identity with family well-being.

In sum, participants exercised agency by using the mainstream Good Mother discourse—specifically, the notion that parents are children's "greatest teacher" (National Center for Family Literacy, 2009) and the key to their academic success—to support their quest for academic and social development. They countered images of Latina women within their home and U.S. cultures, respectively, by pursuing education and by asserting their ability to raise literate children.

The study challenges the stereotype of the passive Mexican immigrant mother who is uninvolved in her child's school life.

Conclusion

This study reveals how, in a program that emphasized mothers' primary role as children's first teacher, Latina immigrants appropriated U.S. mainstream ideas of mothering and education to validate and fulfill their own goals and desires. Family literacy, often seen as a site of colonization (Reyes & Torres, 2007) or imposition of normative ideas of parenting (Gadsden, 2004), offered a place to explore ideas of the self, thereby pushing the boundaries of women's traditionally held mothering discourses. They used narratives of their children's academic success, their ability to negotiate the school system, their support for the family dream of children's college attendance, and their social and academic role modeling for their children as justification to further their own education, to seek out more equitable positions in the family, and to pursue their own desires.

Recommendations

For practitioners and administrators:

- Identify differences and similarities between learners' notions of mothering and education and those underlying program curricula and educators' belief systems. Discuss these differences and similarities with learners so they can better understand the taken-for-granted rules of mainstream society and institutions.
- Involve learners in program and curricular decisions so that their goals and desires can be represented. This can also enhance their self-esteem and prestige outside the classroom.
- Develop learning plans with students to identify their goals and barriers to, and benefits of, attending classes.

For policy makers:

- Support family literacy funding since it provides programming that enables mothers to enroll in adult education and fulfill their role as a Good Mother, oftentimes perceived as the primary and most important role for women, thereby eliminating the need for women to choose between the two.
- Identify and use language that portrays immigrant mothers as having skills and knowledge that benefit the local U.S. community.

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