

Maternal Attitudes and Parent Education: How Immigrant Mothers Support Their Child's Education Despite Their Own Low Levels of Education

Ana Schaller,^{1,2} Lisa Oglesby Rocha,¹ and David Barshinger¹

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A study of Mexican immigrant mothers of young children in the AVANCE-Dallas early childhood intervention program demonstrates that low-educational parents often exhibit ambitious attitudes about educational achievement for their children. Though they lack an extensive academic background, which places their children at risk for low education, their positive attitude manifested in daily pro-educational behaviors overcomes their low education level because they both motivate their children to pursue academic success and participate in their children's learning. The best way to capitalize on immigrant parents' educational drive for their children is to partner with them—either through an intervention program or through early childhood educators' interaction with parents—by showing them how their participation in their children's learning through concrete activities (such as regular mother-child conversation, daily reading, and playtime activities that teach developmental skills) may increase their chances of achieving academic success.

KEY WORDS: Mexican immigrant parents; low education among Hispanic parents; active school participation; positive educational attitude; parent education.

INTRODUCTION

When Alma Coronado arrived in the United States, she dreamed that her children would experience a better childhood than she had, that they would attain an education which would lead to success. Growing up in a large, poor family in Mexico, she did not have that opportunity. And although she wanted an education, Alma only attended school until the third grade because she had to work to support her family.

This was the extent of her educational background when she arrived in the U.S. 5 years ago, and the question facing her was this: How can I help my two children attain a good education when I have so little? That is the question we as educators must ask

ourselves: What hope do children of immigrant parents with little education have of succeeding academically?

In Alma's case, two factors appear to be affecting the outcome. First, she is very enthusiastic about her children getting an education. She believes education will open new doors of opportunity that she never had. But her positive attitude is insufficient, and she knows it, which is why she enrolled in the AVANCE-Dallas parenting program. This is the second factor: Alma has learned how to participate in her children's education. At AVANCE-Dallas, she found the guidance, tools, and support to become her child's first teacher and committed educational partner, helping her bridge the gap of her low education. With the combination of a positive attitude and a parenting education program, Alma Coronado is an active partner in her children's education and a powerful force propelling their future.

Based on our experience here at AVANCE-Dallas and on observations of the earlier Mexican school system structure, where 91% of the population

¹AVANCE-Dallas, 2816 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, TX 75204, USA.

²Correspondence should be directed to Ana Schaller, AVANCE-Dallas, 2816 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, TX 75204, USA; e-mail: ana_schaller@yahoo.com

in the 1970s did not complete grades 1–6 (Miller, 1999), most immigrant mothers who have participated in the AVANCE-Dallas program arrive in the United States without much education, which leaves their children at an educational disadvantage. But as Alma's story demonstrates, an immigrant mother's low education does not necessarily imply that she lacks the attitudes and involvement to help her child succeed. Instead, by targeting parents' attitudes and behaviors during the child's earliest years, we can create a lifelong educational partner for the child that will help him or her excel. At AVANCE-Dallas, a nonprofit early childhood education institution, we discovered upon observing the immigrant mothers who graduated from our two-generational program that, despite low education they exhibit positive attitudes about education and display behaviors which promote their child's achievement.

The thesis of this article is that, despite risks associated with low parental education, a parent's attitude and involvement in education enhance a child's chance at academic success. Thus, a priority for early childhood educators is to cultivate in parents a strong attitude toward learning that is manifested in parental participation in school studies.

The need for bridging the literacy gap in low-education, low-income homes is clear (Evans, 2004; Goldenberg, 1987). But the AVANCE-Dallas case study reveals that the positive attitude and involvement of Mexican immigrant mothers can overcome low education. Higher levels of parental involvement produce higher levels of literacy (Hill et al., 2004), especially in children of low-educated moms (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004).

Thus, low education amongst parents does *not* imply that their children are destined for low educational attainment. Instead, in this study, mothers who graduated from the AVANCE-Dallas program—who received instruction about mother–child interactions, playtime activities that teach developmental skills, and the mother's role as the child's first teacher—demonstrate that parents with low education often have a positive attitude toward education already, but need guidance for channeling their positive attitude to most effectively advance their children.

THE FOCUS ON IMMIGRANT MOTHERS IS IMPORTANT

As Mexican immigrants continue to rapidly increase the size of the Latino population in the U.S.,

it is vital to study Mexican immigrant mothers so we can understand how best to educate the expanding Hispanic population. Population growth is not the only motivation. Hispanic children are more likely to be at an educational disadvantage than whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001), for such reasons as a greater likelihood of poverty and low-educated parents (Rivera, 1997).

With these higher risk factors, a focused study on this population of parents will help us determine whether immigrant parents with low education may exhibit attitudes and behaviors that promote or hinder academic achievement in their children. It will also guide us in determining the best practices for nurturing positive attitudes and involvement in this population.

THE AVANCE-DALLAS STUDY SAMPLE

For the AVANCE-Dallas study we surveyed immigrant mothers from Mexico with low levels of education. We worked with two sub-samples that differed by education level: (1) 29 mothers with 1–2 years of schooling in Mexico, and (2) 30 mothers with 3–6 years of schooling in Mexico. We chose this sample of AVANCE-Dallas graduates because they were the most homogeneous in terms of a Mexican education, with no levels exceeding sixth grade and most of our graduates falling within this range. They summarized their school experience as recorded in Table I.

Most of the mothers stated that they had caring teachers in school and enjoyed attending school as a child, even though it was only for 1–6 years. A portion had a mixture of positive and negative school experiences. All of the mothers described a positive interest in learning, but faced various barriers to education, including insufficient money, negative family feelings about education, cruel peers, learning problems in math and science, and poor treatment at school.

The mothers in this sample offer a common picture of many immigrant parents coming to the U.S.

Table I. Mothers' Education Experience

School Experience	Group with 1–2 years education	Group with 3–6 years education
Positive School Experience	75%	76.7%
Negative School Experience	0%	6.6%
Positive and Negative School Experiences	25%	16.7%

Due to financial barriers, they lack the means to gain education in their home country. The question is whether or not they can help their children attain education here. Their attitudes and behaviors show a willingness and ability when provided instruction about parental involvement in the home and in school.

MEXICAN MOTHERS' STATED ATTITUDE

Our survey asked mothers who graduated from AVANCE-Dallas about their attitude toward education at various levels. Three questions targeted their attitudes about their child's future education. Table II shows the results.

These parents overwhelmingly held strong convictions about their child's educational future. And these results are similar to those reported by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2004): "Nearly all (95%) Latino parents say that it is very important to them that their children go to college," and "the majority (54%) of Latinos say that young people have little chance of success without a college degree" (p. 9).

In this study of AVANCE-Dallas graduates, when asked why they thought education was so important for their child's future, mothers replied that education was essential for a successful career with financial security, that it provided better opportunities than they had, and that it offered endless possibilities. Studies suggest that parents of minority children display strong convictions about helping their children succeed and about their children adopting values of obtaining success through education (Goldenberg, 1987; Valencia & Black, 2002).

The implications from these statements are clear. These Mexican mothers have a verbal commitment to their child's education, and they have a vision of academic achievement for their child. Without this commitment and vision, it is unlikely their children

will adopt a belief in education; they will have little hope for achievement. However, having a vision alone is insufficient. The mothers must act on the vision if it is to become a reality. Do low-educated Mexican mothers do anything about their desire and vision of educational achievement? Our study suggests many want to act, but often need assistance to know *how* to help their child. With guidance, parents with little academic background can inspire their children to achieve.

Interestingly, studies have shown that children of immigrant parents tend to excel academically (Hood, 2003), particularly over their minority peers with U.S.-born parents (Wojtkiewicz & Donato, 1995). This is likely accounted for by the parents' positive attitude toward education, which motivates their children to aspire to great heights. Kao and Tienda (1995) found that "foreign born parents had significantly higher educational aspirations for their children than did native-born parents. Thus, parental immigrant status appears to be a crucial factor shaping the educational aspirations of immigrant youth" (p. 9; see also St. Hilaire, 2002).

To understand how an immigrant mother's attitude intersects with a parenting education program like AVANCE-Dallas, we asked mothers how important education was to them *before* attending our program. The results are shown in Chart 1.

Table II. Maternal Attitudes About Child's Education

Specific Attitudes	Group with 1-2 years education	Group with 3-6 years education
*An education is an important part of my child's future	100%	100%
*My child will graduate from high school	100%	100%
*My child will attend college	93%	100%

Maternal Attitudes About Education Before Participation in Parenting Program (AVANCE)

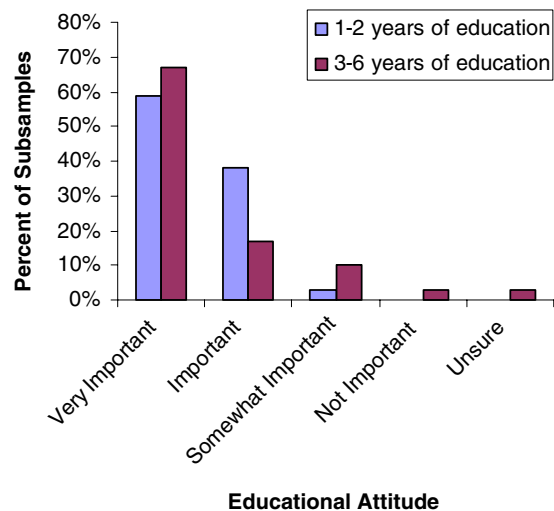


Chart 1. Maternal Attitudes Before Parenting Program

This question shows that these immigrant mothers had a positive attitude about education prior to enrolling in AVANCE-Dallas. A parent’s attitude on education is influential, but parents also need the tools to channel that academic optimism to educational success. Parenting programs like AVANCE-Dallas partner with parents while children are young so parents can partner with their children in education from birth. Early childhood educators can leverage their impact on young immigrant children by nurturing parents’ attitudes and behaviors.

MEXICAN MOTHERS’ BEHAVIORS EVIDENCE THEIR EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENT

The remainder of our survey focused on the behaviors of Mexican mothers to see if they lived out their attitude and to understand the relationship between their educational vision for their child and their experience in the parenting program. These questions were chosen because of research that connects children’s achievement with maternal activities, supportive parenting, and environments sensitive to children’s development (Hill, 2001; Lustberg, 1998; Rauh, Parker, Garfinkel, Perry, & Andrews, 2003). The following questions and results in Table IIIa, b, and Chart 2 examine the involvement level of Mexican mothers in their child’s education.

Number of Average Maternal School Visits to Child’s School Every Month

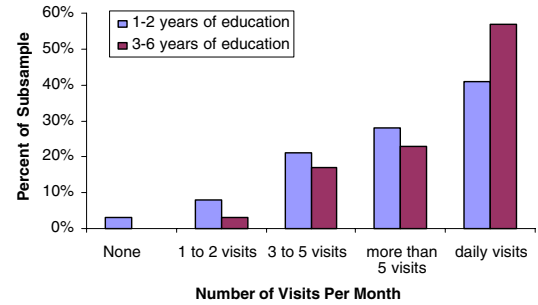


Chart 2. Average Maternal Monthly Visits to Child’s School

These results demonstrate that AVANCE-Dallas graduate mothers participate in their children’s education. The lowest results are in PTA and school volunteering, but these activities reflect the parent’s attitude about helping the *school*, while the other questions reflect her desire to help her *child*.

As Table IIIa, b, and Chart 2 demonstrate, immigrant mothers with low academic achievement but a positive view of education can learn, with instruction, how to actively participate in their children’s lives. A look at a few items in Table III will show how formational these parental activities are in their children.

Table III. Survey Questions and Results

Question	Group with					
	1–2 years education	3–6 years education				
(a) Provides area for child’s homework	86%	90%				
Checks child’s schoolwork	100%	100%				
Helps with child’s homework	86%	93%				
Enjoys helping child with schoolwork	100%	97%				
Ensures child has his or her own books	97%	100%				
Plays games with child	97%	97%				
Talks to child about importance of education	100%	97%				
Talks to child about school experiences	97%	97%				
Is involved in PTA	14%	47%				
Volunteers at school	35%	57%				
Knows child’s teachers	93%	90%				
(b) Question	“always”		“sometimes”		“never”	
Education Level	1–2 years	3–6 years	1–2 years	3–6 years	1–2 years	3–6 years
How often do you motivate your child to do her or his best in school?	86%	88%	7%	12%	7%	0%
How often do you read to your child?	67%	65%	30%	32%	3%	3%
How often do you visit the library?	24%	27%	55%	56%	21%	18%
How often do you limit TV time and playtime with friends?	47%	35%	43%	56%	10%	9%

For example, researchers state that the home environment impacts academic achievement (Rauh et al., 2003), even overcoming factors such as low maternal education and intelligence (Rivera, 1997). That's why the 86–90% of AVANCE-Dallas mothers who provide an area for homework are steering their child in a positive direction. And when 97% of AVANCE-Dallas mothers read to their children always or sometimes, they are doing a simple activity that sets the stage for lifelong literacy (Zeece, 2005).

It's also beneficial when parents enjoy helping their child with homework. A parent's involvement in the child's homework allows children to concretely experience their parent's attitude about schoolwork and about the importance of working on education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Parental involvement with the child's schoolwork has been shown to positively influence the child's involvement in the classroom, completion of homework, and overall behavior (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

When low-educational immigrant parents join a parenting program like AVANCE-Dallas, they further exhibit their positive attitude toward education. The AVANCE-Dallas program capitalizes on their attitude and gives them the resources and vision to participate with their children to attain academic success. Research shows that parenting intervention programs have the greatest impact while the child is still young and that they may enhance the parent-child relationship from multifaceted angles (Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999).

Dearing et al. (2004) note, "interventions that increase educational involvement among low-income families will likely promote children's positive feelings about literacy and, in turn, their literacy achievement, especially in families characterized by both low income and low education" (p. 459). Our findings at AVANCE-Dallas confirm that parents from our program are more involved in their children's education, and preliminary results from AVANCE-Dallas children appear to indicate that they outperform their peers in academics. Their scores on the 2005 standardized TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) assessments reveal their high academic achievement: 88% of AVANCE-Dallas child graduates enrolled in school met the passing standard in reading—compared with 73% in the DISD (Dallas Independent School District) and 83% in the state. And 82% met the standard in math—compared with 60% in the DISD and

71% in the state. More research is needed, but preliminary findings suggest that low-educated parents who get involved in their child's education can create strong, lasting educational development in their children. Ultimately, an immigrant mother's positive attitude about education is most effective when accompanied by concrete participatory behavior, which improves the child's chances at an educational future.

CONCLUSION

The Pew Hispanic Center and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2004) describe immigrants' view of education: "Latinos demonstrate an overarching faith in their local schools and in educational personnel and institutions overall.... Latino parents also appear eager to engage the educational system and to take responsibility for ensuring their children's success" (p. 1). As early childhood educators, we can take advantage of the positive attitude amongst immigrant parents; if we partner with them while their children are still young, we can help them make their educational vision a reality. Then when their children grow up, having achieved academic success, they will transfer their belief in education to the next generation.

Programs or activities like AVANCE-Dallas's acknowledge the powerful influence of parents in an at-risk population. These activities are particularly relevant to early childhood educators working with Mexican-Americans (and other Latino groups) because parental influence is greatest during the first years of life. Parents often have vision for their children, but without guidance, they may not know how to achieve that vision.

The positive behaviors and activities above provide a model for what early childhood educators can encourage parents to do to help their child attain their educational dreams. As early childhood educators, we must be aware of ways we can partner with immigrant parents so that we empower more mothers like Alma Coronado to transform their families with deep-seated attitudes about education and effective academic participation.

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