

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

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***Abstract:** This paper, using data from a qualitative study, examines how Mexican immigrant women in a family literacy program appropriated mainstream discourses of mothering and parent involvement to pursue their personal and academic goals. The paper examines notions of human agency, prevailing parenting and literacy discourses, and learner goals and subjectivities.*

## **Introduction**

By appealing to prevalent discourses, educational programs convey norms about schooling, identity, and, in the case of family literacy, parenting behaviors. These discourses shape educators' views of learners and learner goals, which may or may not adequately reflect learner identities and purposes. This paper examines how Mexican immigrant women enrolled in a family literacy program utilized mainstream discourses of mothering and parent involvement in education to pursue their own personal and academic goals. In so doing, the paper complicates notions of human agency and prevailing discourses pertaining to Mexican women, who are often portrayed as either resisting or passively accepting White, middle-class (WMC) notions of mothering and educational involvement. In brief, participants drew on dominant parenting and educational discourses to justify furthering their education, to support future goals, to create new identities, and to demonstrate their mothering abilities. This research shows how women learners negotiate multiple identities by combining discourses of raising a literate child and being a good mother. Furthermore, the study offers adult education scholars and practitioners alternative ways of understanding learners, their goals, and pathways to achieving these goals.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This paper draws on feminist, post-structural conceptions of discourse, agency, and subjectivities. 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 the "literate being" (Cook-Gumperz, 2006), which privileges school-based literacy practices, and of parenting (Gadsen, 2004), such as the Good Mother who sacrifices her needs to nurture her child cognitively, emotionally, and materially (Griffith & Smith, 2005). As such, these programs aim to instruct poor women and women of color in "proper" parenting (Gadsen, 2004). Second, the concept of agency recognizes that women actively respond to the ideas they encounter in educational sites. In this study, agency means the ability to envision and express one's identity and to achieve one's desires and goals (Meyers, 2002) within the constraints of dominant discourses and social structures (Butler, 2004)—in this case, family literacy programs that promulgate specific ideals of mothering and literacy. Finally, we use the concept of subjectivities to explore how the multiple roles people play, such as mother, student, and wife, support or undermine each other (Butler, 2004).

## Methods

This paper addresses the following research 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 family literacy? The study employed a narrative inquiry methodology with a case study design to foreground the voices and self-representations of participants (Riessman, 2008). The participants—five Mexican immigrant mothers—were enrolled in a Southwestern Even Start family literacy program that provided early childhood education, adult education, parent education, and parent-child interactive literacy activities. 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.

Data sources for this paper include (1) 26 life history interviews focusing on women's past and current educational experiences, their role as mothers, and their hopes for themselves and their children (each person was interviewed four to six times); (2) participant-observation of parent education classes and parent-child interactive literacy activities; and (3) analysis of program documents (e.g., class handouts). All participants were native Spanish speakers; four participants chose to interview primarily in English, the fifth participant chose to interview in Spanish. Using the research questions as a guide, first author Blaire read repeatedly interview transcripts and searched for narratives concerning literacy, motherhood, education, desires, and the meanings attributed to education (Riessman, 2008). Narratives were then compared to prevalent programmatic and societal discourses to see how participants resisted or contradicted them, or used them to support their identities and goals.

## Findings

The findings reveal a paradox: Participants appropriated (Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005) the Good Mother discourse to achieve their own personal and educational goals. As their children's main source of academic support at home, the women maintained that to fulfill this role, they needed to continue their education. They also utilized education to help craft an expanded sense of self that incorporated new goals and greater self-esteem and sense of power. Participants repeatedly attributed this expanded sense of self to their educational engagement. They related stories about how they contributed to their child's school-based success, overtly claiming the need to persist in their own education in order 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 [6<sup>th</sup> 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 assist children with homework, and thus raise literate children.

Second, the women's narratives reveal that their education gave them power and prestige in their families. They became seen as the formal knowledge keepers in the family, as Nelli evidenced in this quote: "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, as the women were seen as role models for others. For example, Carmen

reported that her sister-in-law told her, ““Oh, you have a lot of patience to read with your son and make activities. I never did that ... That is a good thing.’ ... She saw how Javier learn.”

All but one participant encountered resistance from their husbands regarding their educational activities outside the home. Yesmenia demonstrated how she combined the WMC Good Mother discourse with her local narrative of Good Wife to be able to attend classes:

He wants me to be there [at home] with him like before, 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], but it's because of his selfishness that he wants me to be with him. ... Because he already told me, “Stop going to school” and I told him, “If I can't go it is *your* fault, not because I want to stop going [so] I won't go anymore.” So since he told me this, I wasn't going to go to school, but I had everything ready to go to school. ... But later when he saw that I didn't say anything else. ... he [asked,] “Aren't you going to school?” “Yes, I'm going now!” [author translation]

Yesmenia did not contest her husband's control or the family structure; rather, she argued that her learning helps her to be a Good Mother and thereby raise a literate child. She justified her educational pursuits by appropriating both the Literacy discourse and Good Mother discourse.

All five participants used and expanded the mainstream Good Mother discourse to demonstrate their mothering abilities. To this discourse they added cultural beliefs about *educación*, a model of social, moral, and academic development that guides childrearing and parental involvement in education (Prins, in press; Reese, et. al., 1995). Thus, participants believed they should counter the perceived lack of family unity and loose behavior in the U.S. Contrary to prior studies (see Greenfield, et. al., 1998) showing that Latino/a parents emphasize children's behavior, the women also mentioned academic topics such as enrollment in gifted programs, demonstrating knowledge of the school system and educational aspirations for their children. In emphasizing 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 a more appropriate and, in their eyes, higher, standard of mothering. Nelli stated, “I have tried to combine the two, the American and the Mexican, because my sons are growing up in this [American] culture so 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.”

Participating in classes (and U.S. society) seemed to increase participants' desire for more equitable relationships in the home (Hirsch, 2007). Carmen, for example, narrated how she presents her labor in the home as en par to 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.” In this example she presented herself as a literate person and good mother who is capable of helping her child, but she appealed to fairness and duty in explaining why her husband should engage with his children. Furthermore, Guadalupe aspired to be more than a mother; she wanted to get a job and continue her schooling for her own purposes and self-development.

Participants viewed their own education as key to enabling their children to achieve the goals of staying in school and attending college. 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.” All the participants wanted their children to go on to college and provided *consejos* (moral counsel) (Valdés, 1996) in the form of cautionary tales of

what happened to friends or family members who had dropped out of school. They framed their education as vital to supporting their children's academic persistence.

The women reported that the English language skills acquired through their family literacy classes helped them to counter rude store personnel, to navigate systems such as doctor's appointments and schools, and to 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 said,

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 something to translate the conversation. And right now I can talk with my children teacher, by myself. ... I can express what I think. ... I feel that something is interesting for me and I want to learn ... I feel better, I am more prepared. ... I think is for myself, for my person.

She began by stating the effect of her learning on the family—speaking with school staff in English keeps family issues private—and ended by relating learning to ideas about the self, showing how she used education for her personal development.

Attending family literacy 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: They will pursue these goals during school hours or wait until their children are grown.

Finally, the women used the family literacy setting to expand their identities. Olivia sought education "because I think is more things learn out there. Just not one thing, you know. I mean, is not just to be a housewife, do the chores, clean. I mean, the life doesn't end up there. Is more. Is something beyond there." The other women echoed this as they formed ideas about their roles beyond the home, roles that contrasted with the identities of mothers in Mexico. Carmen stated:

In Mexico the life of woman is different. Is only stay at home and take care of the children and cook and take care of husband and here I think it is different because we have different activities. We can do something for ourselves too, no only for the family. ... We can take more education and get a job and I think that is different from me and my mom. ... If I feel good I think all of my family we're gonna feel good too.

This quote illustrates how the benefits of an expanded identity linked to the family's 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 asserting their ability to raise literate children.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study reveals how, in a program that emphasizes the primary role of mother as the child's first teacher, Latina immigrant women appropriated mainstream discourses of mothering and education to validate and fulfill their own goals and desires. Paradoxically, family literacy,

often seen as a location of colonization (Reyes & Torres, 2007) or imposing normative ideas of parenting (Gadsden, 2004), offered women a place to explore ideas of the self, pushing the boundaries of their traditionally held mothering discourses. They utilized narratives of their children's academic successes, their ability to negotiate the K-12 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.

Some may argue that learners merely conformed to the ideologies of mothering and parent involvement encountered in the family literacy program. However, this study demonstrates that when examining what counts as agency, we need to consider the *reasons* people might use a dominant discourse. In this case, participants were motivated by regret that they did not finish their schooling and by their desire to pursue their own goals and support their children's education. Furthermore, engaging in their children's education broke from their models of male parental educational engagement. Thus, appropriating aspects of the WMC mothering role opened up possibilities for more power, different kinds of engagement in the family, and re-envisioning of the self. This study suggests that hegemonic discourses are not all-encompassing; as they circulate people find different ways to use, exist within, and expand them (Foucault, 2003). Asking why a discourse is being used and how life circumstances and experiences shape its use helps us to understand our own notions of power and how we ascribe power to others.

Similarly, participants' role in supporting their children's education could be viewed as reinforcing the unpaid, "complementary educational work" (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 69) upon which schools rely to ensure academic achievement. Viewing their actions through a lens of agency presents a more complicated picture (Mahmood, 2005): The women used dominant parenting and educational discourses—albeit within cultural, social, and material constraints—both to conform to an external standard and to achieve their desires as women, mothers, and wives, to name a few. Although the family literacy program framed education as a means of being a Good Mother, the women appropriated these educational opportunities to support their continued schooling and personal development, to amplify traditional identities, and to undermine deficit views of Mexican mothers. Participant narratives challenge the idea that a person is either resistant to or held captive by a discourse. On the surface participants appear to conform to the WMC Good Mother and Literacy discourses; however, viewing their actions as contextually situated appropriations renders a more complex understanding of learners as simultaneously active, resistant, and compliant.

This study has several implications for the field. First, it disrupts the binary notion of being oppressed by *or* resistant to hegemonic discourses. Adult learners may conform to an external standard; however, their motivations for doing so belie the notion that they are simply succumbing to societal forces. Second, this study undermines the stereotype of the passive Mexican immigrant mother as uninvolved in her child's school life (Valencia, 2002). Third, it highlights the need to identify how program discourses shape curriculum and educators' understandings of learners. Furthermore, it may assist practitioners in aligning program and learner goals and understanding apparent contradictions such as learners wanting to advance their education to support their children, but missing classes to stay home with their husband. Lastly, the study reinforces the need to include learners in decision making about curricula and other programmatic matters.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how immigrant women used a hybrid discourse of raising a literate child and being a good mother to negotiate multiple identities and to disrupt both social and programmatic ideas of who they are. Our investigations of learner agency, then, should account for how learners use (as opposed to simply being subject to) available discourses in trying to achieve their goals and desires. Such a view will expand our understanding of learners and the tools they use to negotiate educational opportunities and societal expectations.

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