Understanding home, school, and community contexts: An ecological perspective of the educational experiences of Mexican Americans

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Abstract

This article presents a social ecological model to increase our understanding of the dynamic interplay between the home and school contexts of Mexican American children and to promote the engagement of their parents and families in the educational process. More specifically, the social ecological model is used to explain processes that occur within those contexts in order to bridge the sociocultural gap that often exists between the home and school experiences of Mexican children and adolescents. The application of the social ecological model will hopefully lead to higher levels of effectiveness in efforts to promote parental engagement and greater academic success among Mexican Americans.

Interest in parent involvement programs and school-community partnerships continues to increase in parallel with efforts to address the achievement gap. This is particularly true in the case of Mexican Americans. Interest in Mexican American families and parental involvement has focused on the nature and impact of home-school linkages for Mexicanorigin children, adolescents, and families (Rodriguez, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Suarez- Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valdes, 1996, Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994). Other researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding the multiple contexts ethnic minority children and adolescents traverse on an everyday basis, particularly as it relates to developmental and educational processes across contexts (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; National Research Council, 1993; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Quintana et al., 2006; Steinberg, Brown & Dornbusch, 1996). However, researchers have only recently begun to explore ways to bridge the cultural discontinuities, which can exist between the home and school experiences of Mexican-origin children and adolescents (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Disparities between the home and school experiences of Mexican origin children and families can be magnified by language differences that impede communication between parents, students, and teachers. Furthermore, immigrant parents themselves may have limited educational experiences and may be unfamiliar with the education system in the United States (Bajaj, 2009; Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003; Suarez- Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdes, 1996). This lack of familiarity can lead to parental behaviors that are often mistakenly viewed as a devaluing of education (Valencia & Black, 2002).

This article presents a social ecological model to enhance our understanding of the dynamic interplay between the home and school contexts of Mexican American children and to promote the engagement of their parents and families in the educational process. The general purpose of the social ecological model is to further our understanding of the psychosocial development and education of Latino children and adolescents within and across varying sociocultural contexts and to formulate developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant approaches that can be applied across these diverse sociocultural contexts. The specific, intended application of the social ecological model in this article is to ex

plain processes that occur within those contexts in order to bridge the sociocultural gap that often exists between the home and school experiences of Mexican children and adolescents. This application of the social ecological model allows us to better understand the educational experiences of Mexican American children and adolescents and increase effectiveness in efforts to promote parental and family engagement. The final section of this article discusses ways in which research, policy, and practice can promote home-school linkages for Mexican Americans.

Contextual Theories and Models for Mexican American Children and Families

Given the complexities of Mexican Americans' everyday experiences in school, home, and community contexts, the interactive dynamics between individuals and groups within varying contexts are particularly salient. The impact of context on human development has been addressed theoretically and empirically dating back to Lewin's dynamic psychology (1935) and Bronfenbrenner's early work on social ecology (1943). Bronfenbrenner's more recent work has emphasized the influence of culture and social status on the interactions between individuals within the various ecologies in which they live including the school and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner noted that the study of immigrant or ethnic minority groups must consider the personal and background characteristics of the individual. More specifically, theories and models have been developed to explore the impact of context on the psychological development and education of Mexican Americans (i.e. Garza and Gallegos, 1995; Garza and Lipton, 1982; Gilbert, 1980). These theoretical models aimed at understanding the complex dynamics of Mexican American life provide a background for the social ecological model presented later in this article.

A Humanistic Interaction Model of human development was initially presented by Garza and Lipton (1982) and later refined to specifically address acculturative processes among Mexican Americans (Garza & Gallegos, 1995). This model allows the examination of sociocultural factors associated with acculturative processes and the influence of such processes on individuals within varying contexts. While the model is not specific to parental engagement in schooling, its interactive quality provides an opportunity to consider the interplay between adolescents, families, and educators as they navigate the home, school, and community contexts.

Gilbert's community model (1980) incorporates historical, migratory, and political factors to describe how community context impacts individuals. Gilbert studied three Mexican American communities, located in different California regions that were differentiated by social, economic, and political factors, identified influential differences in the level of urbanity and Mexican American control of political and economic structures between the three communities that impacted their power, efficacy and influence. Several interrelated factors were cited as explanations for these differences. In essence, the political, economic, and social status of Mexican Americans in each community was determined by the overall community context that included not only the present Mexican American and Euro-American communities, but also the historical legacies of those communities. Overall, these models aim to capture the Mexican American experience as it is influenced within and across multiple contexts. These models facilitate the examination of the dynamic nature of various contexts that are defined by multiple factors (i.e. sociocultural, economic, political, etc.). While these models are not focused specifically on parent engagement and educational processes, they allow for the exploration and consideration of parental engagement within the broader framework of Mexican Americans navigating between home and school contexts.

A Social Ecological Model for Understanding Mexican American Families

As previously mentioned, the social ecological model presented here is a tool to further the understanding of the dynamic interplay between the home and school contexts of Mexican American children and to promote the engagement of their parents and families in the educational process. While the social ecological model can be applied more generally to better understand the psychosocial development and education of Mexican American, in this article it is specifically focused on home-school linkages and parental engagement in education among Mexican Americans.

In the social ecological model social, political, economic, and cultural factors are described in order to explain the complex processes within and across contexts that impact the psychological development and educational experiences of Mexican Americans including parent engagement. These factors shape the larger school or community settings and, simultaneously, shape the dynamics within the home setting. Whereas most theories and research look only at individual families in relation to a monolithic "school setting," the proposed social ecological model highlights how the characteristics and intersections of individuals with the school context and its characteristics change the nature of family-school relationships and ultimately educational opportunities and outcomes.

Several salient school/individual factors (defining) that shape this interaction that are often missed in prior research include (1) the numerical status of a group, (2) the social status of a group, (3) the amount of intergroup contact, and (4) the urbanity of an ecological/school setting. These defining factors can be used to understand the school and home contexts and to develop hypotheses concerning various processes including family engagement within those contexts. In turn, behavioral, psychological, and educational processes within these contexts are mediated or impacted by interrelated mediatory factors that may differ by context: cultural expression, empowerment, and opportunities. Together, the defining and mediatory factors explain what the context is and how it impacts processes such as family involvement. Figure 1 illustrates the defining and mediating factors by which the ecological/school context is understood and that explain the relationship between the ecological/school context and psychological and educational outcomes.

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The social ecological model and its defining and mediatory processes will be described next.

Defining Factors

Examinations of the impact of group status have been limited to studies of minority status, where minority status has been determined either by membership in an ethnic minority group or in a numerical minority group.In the United States, Mexican Americans are both an ethnic minority group and a numerical minority. For the most part, the role of minority status in the psychological development of youth has primarily been concerned with the study of social identity (Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992) and ethnic identity formation (Smith, 1991). Research concerning the minority status of Mexican American adolescents has focused on ethnic identity (Rotherum-Borus, 1993; Rotherum-Borus, 1990) and acculturative stress (Saldana, 1995). Generally, this research has found that minority status in a given setting has greater impact on ethnic minorities than on individuals belonging to the cultural majority group (i.e., Euro-Americans).

The first two factors defining factors of the social ecology or school context1 are the numerical and social status of a group. Numerical and social statuses are explained simultaneously because they can be used to create a typology of ecological context. The numerical status of Mexican Americans within a given school is based upon the proportion of Mexican American students out of the entire school student population. Within this model of school context, the numerical status of other ethnic groups within a school is also important. The most important of these other groups, is the numerical status of Euro- Americans who are most often the dominant ethnic group and are typically considered to be, and portrayed to be the "mainstream" and “normative” group, often differing from commonly held views of other ethnic minority groups including Mexican Americans (Coll et al, 1996; Quintana et al., 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

The social status of Mexican Americans is determined by its ability to integrate itself within the school, to the point that its members can take part in determining the structure of the school context. Members of a social majority group can integrate themselves within the “mainstream” of the school or dictate what the “mainstream” within a school will be. Members of a social minority group will not have the same ability to integrate themselves within or to determine the “mainstream”. Although the social status of a group can be related to their numerical status, social status may also be due to economic and political parameters. For example, a numerical minority group can have social majority status if they have high political and economic status. Recent research has noted instances in which Mexican Americans attain social majority status when, for the most part, they are also a numerical majority or there is no numerical majority present in the school ecology (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll & Ruiz, 2005; Rodriguez, 1996; Rodriguez, in press).

A third defining factor that can be used to determine school context is the amount of intergroup contact between various groups. The frequency of intergroup contact, when there are multiple ethnic groups present, can be impacted by a group’s numerical and social status. This is especially true in urban school settings where school integration is attempted through busing, magnet schools, and school transfer programs. Researchers have recently highlighted the potential impact of intergroup contact and the need to further examine its role within developmental and educational processes for ethnic minority groups (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll & Ruiz, 2005; Quintana et al., 2006).

A fourth defining factor to be considered when defining school context is the urbanity of the setting. Social scientists have primarily considered and examined rural and urban ecologies (i.e. Gilbert, 1980; Moll & Ruiz, 2005). In this social ecological model suburban and border rural categories of urbanity are also included to more comprehensively account for the ecologies in which Mexican Americans live. The border rural category has been specifically included to account for social ecological contexts along the United States-Mexico border. The social ecology or school context in which Mexican Americans live, learn, and develop is defined by numerical status, social status, intergroup contact and urbanity. Within each ecology, as defined by the four factors, mediatory factors explain how developmental and educational processes such as parent engagement are shaped and influenced. Taken together, the defining and mediatory factors provide an opportunity to conceptualize and examine contextual impacts on psychological and educational processes. The three mediatory factors in the social ecological model (cultural expression, empowerment, and opportunities) are interrelated and are briefly described in the next section.

1 *School context is used as a proxy for social ecology in this article since the focus is on home-school linkages and parent engagement in education.*

Mediatory Factors

Cultural expression is the ability and propensity of an ethnic group to manifest or express culturally related behavior, values, and traditions and is implicit within many studies of Mexican Americans although it can be referenced under an assortment of variable labels (i.e. funds of knowledge; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). An ecological or school context may be relatively open or closed to the cultural expression of one or more ethnic groups. For example, an ethnically homogenous rural school where Mexican Americans are the numerical and social majority might be more open to the expression of traditional Mexican values and traditions including the usage of Spanish. This openness could be attributed not only to the group's numerical and social dominance, but also the isolation of the group and the lack of intergroup contact within the context. Contrary to the previous example, an ethnically diverse urban school may be closed to the cultural expression of Mexican Americans if they are not the numerical or social majority and the amount of intergroup contact is high. Cultural expression can help explain Latino family involvement in schooling within a specific ecological/ school context if we focus on Spanish language usage as an example. If language is a barrier to family-school relations and involvement in schooling, the openness to cultural expressiveness within a context via Spanish language usage can promote or impede family-school relations, parental engagement, and achievement (Bajaj, 2009; Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003; Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994).

Feelings of empowerment can be defined as the degree to which individuals feel enabled to act or to participate within a social ecology. Empowerment is meant to imply more than the power held by individuals. It is meant to imply the potential of individuals, who then decide, to have and use power. Feelings of empowerment are interrelated with cultural expressiveness and opportunities. For example, higher levels of cultural expressiveness may promote positive feelings of empowerment. Feelings of empowerment can be influenced by numerical and social status within an ecological/school context. If their status is enhanced, their feelings of empowerment are raised. If their status becomes diminished, their feelings of empowerment are lowered. The effect of numerical and social status on Mexican Americans' feelings of empowerment is also magnified depending on the amount and nature of intergroup contact. Particular aspects of family-school relations and family involvement can be promoted by feelings of empowerment. For example, in ecological/ school contexts where family members feel empowered, they are more likely to approach and engage with teachers and other school personnel to advocate for their child (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll & Ruiz, 2005).

Finally, the opportunities, perceived and real, available to individuals within an ecological/ school context is influenced by the defining factors and is interrelated to cultural expression and empowerment. The definition of opportunities within a school context includes immediate opportunities such as participating in school sports and more distant opportunities such as attending college. An example of how opportunities might vary by context is the perceived and real employment opportunities in an urban context as opposed to a rural context. Numerical and social statuses within the rural setting can also increase the number of employment opportunities while lower numerical and social statuses in an urban setting may lower the number of employment opportunities. Family-school linkages and parent engagement can be impacted by children's and family members' perceptions of opportunities present or absent within the social ecology. Recent scholarship has noted that parent's perceptions of educational opportunities within the ecological/ school context is likely to lead to greater engagement in the educational process and advocate for greater opportunities for their

children (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll & Ruiz, 2005; Rodriguez, 1996; Valdes, 1996).

In sum, defining factors can be used to determine the ecological/school context and mediatory factors explain how processes are shaped and influenced within social ecologies. Taken together, defining and mediatory factors provide an opportunity to conceptualize and examine contextual impacts on psychological and educational processes including parental engagement and support for education.

Research Implications and Opportunities

The social ecological model presents a number of research issues and opportunities to enhance our understanding of familial and educational processes among Mexican Americans.

The social ecological model raises research questions concerning the impact of school segregation and desegregation on parental engagement and the educational attainment among Mexican Americans. Previous research found a negative relationship between academic achievement and the concentration of Latino students within high schools (Espinosa & Ochoa, 1986; Donato, Menchaca, & Valencia, 1991) and more recent literature that has chronicled the historical patterns of inequity and achievement within segregated schools serving Latino students (Valencia, Menchaca, & Donato, 2002). These studies reported that Mexican American students in schools with higher concentrations of minority students, including mostly Mexican American schools, have lower academic achievement than Mexican American students in school with lower concentrations of minority students. However, the schools in these earlier studies were primarily urban schools in large school districts. The impact of segregation on specific developmental and educational processes such as parent engagement has also been noted (Bajaj, 2009; Coll et al., 1996). The social ecological model presented in this article suggests further exploration of the impact of segregation/desegregation (voluntary and involuntary) on parent engagement and the educational attainment of Mexican Americans.

There is also an opportunity to apply the social ecological model to examine regional differences for Mexican Americans and other Latino populations. The utilization of the model for research examining Mexican American parental engagement in various states and regions in the United States would provide insight into the model's utility, allow further refinement of the defining factors, and increase understanding of contextual and individual factors that impact parental engagement and home-school linkages. Research is needed to assess the applicability of the social ecological model to the various Latino populations in the United States given the diversity among Latinos (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez- Orozco, 2001). A growing body of evidence also points to the importance of understanding the model's robustness in understanding familial processes, parental engagement, and educational outcomes for immigrants and non-immigrants (Bajaj, 2009; Machado-Casas, 2009).

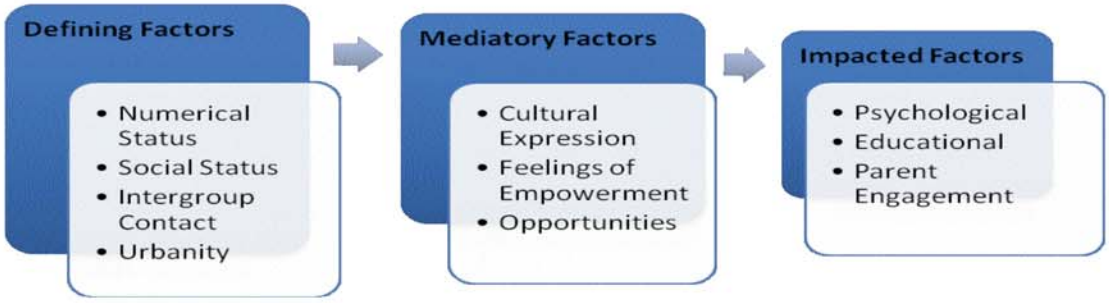
Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The social ecological model also has implications for educational policy and practice in relation to Mexican American parent engagement and educational experiences. In addition to research considerations, there are implications for school segregation/ desegregation policy. It is important to understand how the social ecologies might be impacted by policies that result in voluntary and involuntary segregation/desegregation. In many instances, school desegregation or integration is accomplished through busing programs that, more often than not, transport Mexican American children and adolescents from their home community and place them into an entirely different community that is geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally distant. From a practical standpoint of

distance, time, and transportation, busing students to disparate communities can present obstacles for parents who want to engage in the educational process directly and provide excuses for parents who are disengaged. Segregation/ desegregation policy can impact various defining and mediatory factors and shape a social ecology. Mexican American children and adolescents can find themselves crossing boundaries between being a numericalmajority and minority within various social ecologies on a daily basis.

The promotion of home-school linkages and parental engagement requires an understanding of the various social ecologies Mexican American children and families navigate in their daily lives. It is probable that multiple program models are necessary to address various social ecologies and sociocultural diversity among Mexican Americans. The social ecological model presented in this article can be utilized in the conceptualization and development of programs that promote home-school linkages and parental engagement. Policies, funding, and programs at the federal, state, and local levels must be responsive to contextual and sociocultural diversity among Mexican Americans. Consideration of contextual and sociocultural diversity in the planning, development, and implementation of parental involvement programs is necessary to maximize their effectiveness. For example, previous research has established the importance of understanding generational differences for Mexican American and other immigrant populations (Rodriguez, 2002; Buriel & DeMent, 1997). Programs that promote home-school linkages, parental engagement, and parental involvement can benefit from future studies that utilize the social ecological model to further examine the diversity within Mexican American and other Latino populations. Increased awareness and understanding should lead to greater sensitivity and proficiency in the development and implementation of culturally responsive programs. Furthermore, programs must incorporate mechanisms that utilize the group's strengths to more effectively serve Mexican children, adolescents, and families resulting in stronger home-school linkages, greater levels of parental engagement, and increased academic success.

Figure 1. Ecological Model of School/Community Context



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