

# **Lo Que Aprendimos: Advice for the Next Generation of Parents**

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## **Abstract**

This essay identifies several themes presented by my parents, Abel and Juanita Jiménez. They are parents of five children who successfully navigated through the K-12 system and earned university degrees. They were interviewed over several evenings and asked what advice they would provide to the next generation of Latino parents. My parents discussed the importance of being engaged with their children both at home and school. At home, they emphasized nurturing a strong familial identity, a strong linguistic and cultural identity, and modeling lifelong learning. At school, the focus was on advocating for your children and for the needs of the Latino community. Schools as well as our research community need to place more emphasis on the voices of parents who have effectively engaged in their children's education and work collaboratively to welcome and support parental engagement.

There is ample evidence in the field of education that parental engagement in children's education benefits students in numerous ways (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004; Olivos & Ochoa, 2006). Parental engagement has been shown to positively affect academic outcomes (Deker & Deker, 2003; Jeynes, 2005). Delgado- Gáitan (2004) has written that educators, teacher assistants, counselors, principals, community liaisons, and other personnel sometimes believe that because parents come from lower socio-economic communities or have less formal education, they do not care about their children's education. Furthermore, low-income immigrant parents are often viewed as being indifferent to their children's schooling, failing to encourage their children's academic achievement and, overall, placing low value on education (Orozco, 2008).

Too often parental engagement is studied from the perspective of school personnel, but not often enough from the point of view of the parents (Lott, 2003; Orozco, 2008). Given that parental engagement is a critical component of students' academic achievement, it is imperative that parents' own experiences about effective parental engagement are reported

and shared with all stakeholders in our educational system. Parents can be effective in helping other parents understand and develop the cultural capital needed to navigate the educational system (Valdés, 1996).

In the following narrative, I address various issues that my own parents have raised in regard to effective parental engagement. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find countless research articles of Latino students who have been pushed out of the education system or are underachieving academically. This narrative is different in that it seeks to identify key strategies that enabled all five children in one family to successfully navigate through the K-12 system and beyond. My parents learned valuable lessons through their active engagement in their children's education within the home, school and community – lessons that they wish to pass on to the next generation of parents.

## **Setting the Context**

My parents immigrated from Baja California, Mexico to California in the mid-1960's. As is the case with many immigrants, they came in search of improved opportunities to achieve the "American Dream" of providing a better economic

and educational future for their children. Back in Mexico, my father had completed his schooling through the seventh grade and had attended a few months of eighth grade. He was the man of the house and financially responsible for helping support his six younger siblings. Education was not a priority in his own home given the financial constraints in his family and he had promised himself that this would not be the case with his own children someday. My father could see that his limited education restricted his opportunities in the job market in Mexico. He left his mother and siblings and joined his father in California in hopes of economic independence. My mother had completed a high school degree in Mexico, with a specialization in accounting. While she had always dreamed of going on to university studies, it had been clear that her brothers would be the only ones given the opportunity to pursue a higher education. My mother had strong aspirations to move to El Norte and as a newlywed, her dream came true when she joined my father in the U.S. In the spring of 1969, I was born, followed by Norma in 1971, Abel in 1972 and Ruth in 1974. DulceMonica would follow a few years later in 1985. All of us were born in Southern California, where we remained throughout our K-12 schooling experiences.

As my parent engaged with the American educational system, they always served as advocates for education within their own nuclear and extended family. Of their five children, two of us, Norma and I hold doctorate degrees in Education from Harvard, my sister Ruth earned a law degree from Loyola Law School, my brother Abel Jr. has a Bachelor's of Science degree in Engineering from the University of California, Irvine and my youngest sister DulceMonica graduated with a Bachelor's of Science degree in Biopsychology from Occidental College last spring. Now in their early sixties and grandparents to nine grandchildren, I wanted to know what they learned as parents while navigating through the K-12 education system and what advice they would pass on to the next generation of Latino parents.

## **Method**

A single case study approach was used to describe the experiences of my parents as they worked within the U.S. school system. By examining their reflections, I hope that this type of documentation will "lead to a better understanding, perhaps better theorizing about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 1994, p. 237). The research question guiding the data collection for this study was, "What advice would you pass on to the next generation of Latino parents who currently have children in the K-12 system?" Given the specific population, Latino parents navigating the K-12 school system, the case study approach is appropriate in seeking to describe and explain a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 1988).

I interviewed my parents over the course of two weeks on five different occasions and each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 70 minutes. Each open-ended interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. I divided the analysis procedure into the five modes suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999): a) organizing the data; b) identifying themes, patterns, and categories; c) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; d) searching for alternative explanations of the data; and e) writing the report. Each transcript was read multiple times. I then selected excerpts from the transcripts and placed them into broad categories in search of thematic connections within and among the transcripts (Seidman, 1998). Eight verification procedures for enhancing the trustworthiness of findings are discussed by Creswell (1998) and it is suggested that at least two of them are addressed by qualitative researchers in any given study. In this case study, three procedures were addressed: member checking, peer review, and clarifying research bias.

## **Findings**

In general, I found that my parents' advice centered on the overarching theme that parents have to be deliberately engaged with their children both at home as well as at school. The findings were then separated into two major

themes, parental engagement in the home and parental engagement in the school. Parental engagement in home enveloped several smaller themes, such as nurturing unity in the home, nurturing a strong cultural and linguistic identity and modeling life-long learning. Parental engagement in the school encompassed parents' advocacy for their children as well as advocacy for the Latino community.

### **Parental Engagement in the Home**

My parents in their comments emphasized the importance of actively engaging with us in the home, both in academic and nonacademic activities. One of their central beliefs about how to best prepare children to be successful in school is to equip them with a strong familial, cultural and linguistic identity which will empower them to overcome some of the challenges they will face in school. My parents also strongly believe that parents need to model life-long learning strategies if they expect their children understand the value of education. It is much more effective to show children that you value education than simply telling them that you do.

#### *Nurture Unidad - Strong Familial Resiliency and Achievement Motivation*

As we went through the K-12 system, different opportunities presented themselves that allowed my parents to model family unity which developed resiliency and motivation in us to achieve academically. They always held multiple jobs and a number of them involved the entire family. When we were young, our family worked together delivering several paper routes. This experience included picking up the papers, folding them and delivering the paper door to door. All of us children participated in the process. As we grew older, the girls would go with my mom to clean people's homes and to work as servers at parties. My brother would accompany our dad to construction jobs and help as much as possible.

While we were in middle school and high school, my dad was seriously injured at one of his jobs and was declared legally disabled. Our family's income during that time came from

working at a local swap meet. My parents would drive over an hour every Tuesday morning to buy items wholesale such as radios, bicycles, and toys, accompanied by one or two of their children. Friday nights were spent as a family, pricing and loading all of the merchandise. Saturday and Sunday mornings began at 4:00 a.m. as the family made their way to secure a premium spot at the swap meet located 70 miles away. My parents both concluded that the most important lesson learned from these times was the value of spending time as a family. The circumstances called for all of the children to pull together as a family in order for us to survive financially. These opportunities to spend time together allowed my parents to get to know each of their children. During these tough financial times, though, my parents never neglected to emphasize the importance of education and always made it clear that each child's foremost responsibility was to do well academically and instilled the belief that if we could get through this tough economic time, we could get through anything. Both of my parents believed that difficult circumstances are to be overcome, not used as excuses.

First of all, their primary responsibility was getting good grades. There were too many of us and everyone had to help financially. We believed that people who are busy accomplish more. We both believe that people who want to do things, do them when they want, regardless of the circumstances. You can do lots of thing – we do it. It's possible to do lots of things. *Todo está en los padres* (It's all up to the parents) but every set of parents is different and every child is different. There was the advantage that the oldest children were all so close together. To work in the swap meet, the newspapers – it was easier because we all worked together and we spent time with each of you. -Abel (my father)

“One of the added benefits of getting to know each child,” stated my mother, “is that they learned how to motivate each one of

them differently when they struggled in college.” For one child, the reminder that the swap meet waited for them if they didn’t finish college was enough to motivate her to keep working hard in school. For another, the reminder that she was the role model for the younger siblings kept her motivated. “We wouldn’t have known each child so intimately had we not spent so much time together as a family when they were younger,” my mother remarked. The importance of creating a sense of “unidad” which nurtured resiliency was seen by my parents as critical to motivating and supporting each child as they went through school.

### *Nurture a Strong Linguistic and Cultural Identity*

My parents had both agreed that their children should become bilingual by continuing to speak only Spanish at home and learning English at school, even though this meant that they themselves would not learn English through their children. As Abel stated,

We have always been very proud of being of Latino heritage. Some people may speak English better than us but they still feel ashamed of being from Latino heritage. That’s why we focused on Spanish, because we were proud of it and we knew that in the long run, all of our children would benefit from being bilingual.

Both my parents emphasized the importance of speaking only Spanish in the home in order to learn and maintain the heritage language.

During our interviews, my mother affirmed several times how proud she is that all five of her children are bilingual. None of her children have accents when speaking Spanish or English and when traveling in Mexico, she stated that many relatives congratulate her on her success of not losing Spanish in the home. She also commented numerous times that she is very disappointed that none of her grandchildren are truly bilingual, but rather, all are English dominant with varying levels of Spanish proficiency. My mother said, “If it was up to me, my grandchildren would all be

In addition to the language, many aspects of the Mexican culture were emphasized in the home. From the music heard in the living room to the food cooked in the kitchen, my parents always emphasized how proud their children should be of their cultural roots. Although both my parents had limited formal schooling, they were very knowledgeable about Latin American history, government, art, music, and dance and would often provide impromptu lessons. My sister DulceMonica, was active in a Mexican Ballet Folklorico from preschool through her high school graduation. The family traveled quite extensively throughout Mexico during school vacations and every trip incorporated mini-lessons about geography and history. My father would always joke with his children about how every great invention originated in Mexico. While the children all knew he was joking, my father’s goal was to instill in us a pride that we came from an intelligent and resourceful cultural background.

### *Model Life Long Learning*

My parents also spoke about the importance of parents modeling learning and showing their children the value of an education. My father stated, “Ninety percent of whether or not a child is motivated to do well in school is about the parents. Parents have to keep learning and set the example for the children.” My mother added, “We all learn from examples. The example the parents set – if the parents are hardworking, if parents value education, then the children learn that. But just talking isn’t enough, the parents must follow up with actions.” When I asked my parents for a specific example, they spoke about taking English classes at the local community college. They modeled for us the importance of continuing their own education and we saw our parents doing homework and studying for exams.

In another example, my mother was offered a teacher’s assistant job while her children were in elementary school and happily accepted the position. After a few years, she decided that she would attend community college and work towards an Associate’s



degree. She attended classes, completed homework assignments, and took exams. When we would complain about the difficulty of classes, she would tell us, "If I can do it at my age, you have no excuses." My father also reported that he modeled being knowledgeable about current events by reading several daily newspapers. "Although I lacked much formal education, I was able to help my children with some of their homework assignments because I remembered reading about historical events and could provide them with the context of the specific time in which certain events occurred," he stated.

### *Parental Engagement in the School*

My parents discussed in detail the importance of having parents be engaged in school settings at all levels of the education system – the classroom, the school, and through leadership positions. They pointed to many occasions when they had to juggle schedules in order to attend school functions. Both stated that they believed it was very important for their children to see their parents at school events such as music or holiday programs in order for the children to understand that school was a priority. Attending parent-teacher conferences and special events such as graduations were also of utmost importance to my parents. By being actively engaged in schools at various levels, they both felt that they had a responsibility to advocate for their children and to advocate for their community. "The responsibility to serve as advocates now needs to be shared with the next generation of parents," they emphasized throughout our discussion.

### *Advocate for Your Children*

I was born with a birth defect that affects my left hand. My peers teased me throughout elementary school and by the sixth grade, the bullying had escalated to the point that my parents feared for my safety. Both my parents had spoken to the teachers and no action had been taken. In fact, my father reported that they had been told that it was other Latino children who were teasing; therefore, it was a problem within our own community, not a school problem. He was given no explanation by the

We saw that she came home crying because of her hand and the teachers didn't do anything to help her. If she was white, they wouldn't have ignored her. The toughest teasers were other Latino kids. They were cruel. And we saw that the teachers didn't care and didn't pay attention. I fought with the principal several times because they didn't protect her. I made myself understood in English. They thought that our English was bad but their Spanish was worse, so we were better off trying out our English. And then at least they were our words, not somebody else's. At her 6th grade graduation, when our daughter graduated with all A's, the principal *nos mando por un tubo* (completely ignored us). But we had not kept quiet about the issue.

My parents had resolved that this particular school would not address their daughter's needs, despite their attempts at advocating for her needs.

Another example of when my parents advocated for one of their children occurred when my youngest sister, DulceMonica, entered kindergarten. She had been placed in a bilingual program, in which all of her instruction was delivered in Spanish. When my mom went into the classroom one day, she discovered that the teacher who was teaching in Spanish had very low Spanish proficiency. She was appalled that her daughter was expected to learn Spanish from this teacher. She went to various administrators to complain to no avail. My mother then spoke with a number of other parents in the same class and together, they demanded that their children be transferred to another classroom. As Juanita stated, "The teacher teaching in Spanish spoke terrible Spanish and so I thought, if this is the person teaching Spanish, we don't want our children learning mediocre Spanish. So we and other parents protested." My mother stated that she recalled her earlier experiences advocating for her eldest daughter years before and realized that to unite as a group of parents instead of advocating as an individual would be much more powerful.

## *Advocate for the Needs of Our Latino Community*

When I entered fourth grade, mandatory busing in the Los Angeles Unified School District was implemented. Having been attending a predominantly Latino elementary school, I was now bused to a school in a predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood. While many parents in their community were protesting the busing policy, my father saw it as an opportunity for us to experience a bigger world and was upset when he did not see more Latino parents engaged.

Because our old school was in a predominantly Latino community, you didn't see as much parent participation as we saw at the new school. I remember that we went to a meeting at this new school and we couldn't believe that we were the only ones there from our neighborhood. - Abel

My mother added,

Up to that point, we were happy with our old school because we didn't know better. When we saw that parents were demanding things at schools like the new one where our children were being bused to, we saw a different world. We saw first hand the power of being involved. They had better teachers, newer books, even better playgrounds.

Because of experiences such as this, my parents decided to become active in advocating for their community by serving in school governance, asking for equity in resources on behalf of other parents who did not attend.

### **Discussion**

Several major themes emerged from the interview transcripts which address how Latino parents can be actively engaged in their children's K-12 educational experiences. The first few themes that arose related the role that parents should play in the home was it relates to formal schooling. The next couple of themes related to how parents can serve as advocates in schools. Delgado-Gaitán (2001) in her work has stated that parents who are engaged with their children's education both at home and at school is characteristic of high achieving Latino

students. These parents are aware of schools' expectations for their children and support them both by providing both the roots at home to foster resiliency and motivate them academically as well as providing the wings that will allow them to explore their own academic aspirations (Garcia, 2001; Valdéz, 1996).

Both my parents created and fostered a sense of family unity in order to provide us with a strong sense of resiliency as we entered and traversed through the K-12 system. Some of the strategies they used to do so arose from the financial hardships our family encountered, such as when my father became injured and we as a family had to work at the swap meet. Others were "teachable moments" in which my parents used those times when the family was together to deepen relationships with each child and get to them as individuals. By doing so, they were better able to prepare them to deal with any difficult encounters they would have at school, such as bullying which was experienced by several of us children. This also helped them tailor how they motivated us academically, knowing that some of us would react more positively to reminders about the hardships of having to work with our hands, versus our minds.

My parents also emphasized the need to nurture a strong sense of cultural and linguistic pride. As with my parents' intent to nurture a sense of family unity, their intent in developing our cultural and linguistic identities was because they believed that this would foster resiliency. They believed that building strong foundation in knowing Spanish and developing pride in our cultural background, we would be better equipped to handle racism and discrimination in the schools. This emphasis on the importance of culture and being bilingual is important to many Latino parents (Delgado-Gáitan, 2004; Orozco, 2008).

By building us up in this manner, they stated that we would not internalize the negative stereotypes encountered in school. Garcia (2001) in his work examining programs that support Latino students' academic achievement found that this deliberate

development of cultural self-esteem was an effective strategy. The mediating role of families can help students contradict negative messages about their academic abilities that they may receive at school (Nieto & Bode, 2008). We were taught that we were bright, capable students and that if we encountered difficulties in school, they were not due to our cultural or linguistic background.

My parents also strongly emphasized the importance of modeling life-long learning for us both formally and informally. Family modeling of life-long learning is highly correlated with academic success (Gorard, Rees, & Fevre, 1999). Both parents enrolled in adult English language classes and my mother attended community college courses with the goal of attaining an associate's degree. My father has always seen himself as a student of history and is an avid reader of newspapers as well as of non-fiction political literature. They not only told us to keep learning, but they modeled it in their daily lives.

Parental engagement at various levels of the education system is critical for schoolhome partnerships to be effective (Berger, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008). My parents were active at various levels as they advocated both for their children as well as for the needs of the Latino community. However, there were a number of structural elements that hindered their engagement in school. As they advocated for me with school administrators in several incidents related to bullying, the language barrier between the principal and my parents hindered their ability to express the frustrations they were feeling. Translators were available, but my parents felt that the translator's Spanish skills were not sufficiently strong to understand and translate the extent of my parents' concerns. This issue of Spanish proficiency was also important in my parents' decision to lead a group of parents who were demanding quality bilingual instruction. Javier (2007) and Cheatham (in press) have documented that if schools want to break through language

barriers, they need to be cognizant of not only levels of language proficiency of school personnel, but also of these individuals' translation skills and levels of cultural understanding.

Whereas some parents disengage when schools do not respond to their concerns (Mapp, 2003), my parents decided to become more active. My mother decided to take a leadership position within the school PTA when she saw the inequities that existed among local elementary schools. Although she struggled with her English, she believed that in order to have our community's needs met in terms of quality teachers, books, and playground equipment, parents like herself needed to be present at official school meetings and advocate on behalf of the community.

## Conclusion

When asked if they would do anything differently given their experiences with the K-12 system, both emphatically stated, "No. *Nada[translate].*" Juanita concluded our final interview by remarking, "We would do it all over again because education is invaluable. *Los triunfos de los hijos son las satisfacciones de los papas. Esa es la recompensa de los padres—la satisfacción.* (A parent's satisfaction is in their children's triumphs. Satisfaction is the parents' reward.)" By listening to personal narratives that recount the experiences of Latino parents, we can tap into our Latino communities' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2005) and pass on those funds to those parents currently in the K-12 system. It is critical that we continue to advance the discussion about how to more effectively engage Latino parents in the K-12 system and perhaps we should be focusing to a greater extent on the words of parents who have experienced success firsthand and who are willing to share that expertise with the next generation of parents.

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