Mexican Roots, American Schools

Helping Mexican Immigrant Children Succeed

ROBERT CROSNOE

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Chapter 1:

American Dreams for a New Generation

The numbers certainly do grab the attention. 115,864, that is the number of Mexican immigrants who came to the U.S. in 2003. 3,100,000, that is the number of Mexican immigrants who currently have legal resident status in the U.S. 55,946, that is number of Mexican immigrants granted American citizenship in 2003. 2,400,000, that is the number of Mexican immigrants currently eligible for American citizenship (U.S. Department of Immigration Statistics, 2005). Even simply as basic statistics presented without context, these numbers go a long way towards capturing the future of American society—how immigration from Mexico will, in the coming years, profoundly alter, transform, diversify, and enrich everything about the U.S., from its economy to its cultural fabric to the very essence of what it means to be an American. At the same time, these numbers build a bridge between the future, the present, and the distant as well as not-so-distant past by linking a long history in which immigration served as a workhorse in the building of the American population and as a wellspring in the continual renewal of American culture to a tomorrow in which a new demography truly is *our* destiny.

What is the story hiding behind these numbers? It is doubtlessly one of hope, one of immeasurable expectation. Day after day, week after week, year after year, Mexicans migrate to the U.S., through various methods and points of entry, in search of better jobs, expanded opportunities, greater freedoms, new experiences, and things far less specific, such as hazy, ill-defined, but powerful images of a better tomorrow. In short, they come to improve their lives by making a journey that covers a relatively small geographical

space but a great social and economic chasm. Importantly, they come with their children, those already born and growing, those about to be born, those who will be born at some point in the future. These children, in fact, are often the primary motivation for immigration and become the receptacles of their parents' American dreams. Above and beyond their expectations of what they may gain for themselves in their new country, Mexican immigrants look to their children's futures as the true, enduring payoff of their journey and of all the trials and tribulations that this journey entails.

We know, of course, that these dreams go unrealized more often than not. Breathtakingly high poverty rates go along with low social mobility. Jobs do not materialize, and, when they do, they do not pay or do not last. Immigrants are met with institutionalized and even legalized discrimination. They face social, economic, residential, and cultural obstacles that seem nearly impossible to surmount. A good deal of scientific research tells us so, as do many of the observations of and experiences with Mexican immigrants in our own personal lives. These unrealized dreams, however, are not a persuasive argument against the decision to immigrate, nor evidence of the necessity of closing the U.S.-Mexican border, nor even a valid reason to lose hope. Instead, these dashed dreams, when coupled with the statistics described above, send out a call to arms. The time is *now* to figure out how to facilitate the realization of the dreams at the very heart of the Mexican immigrant experience.

The children of Mexican immigrant families should be a primary focal point in the pursuit of this basic but important goal. Statistics on the exponential growth of these children in the American student population have generated a good deal of heated debate and often emotional rhetoric from the highest levels of policy development and

implementation down to the dinner tables of individual families in towns across the nation. These statistics are generally seen as a cause for concern, of alarm even. Yet, the growing number of young children from Mexican immigrant families also represents an invaluable opportunity in national attempts to improve the long-term prospects of Mexican immigrants. Not only are these children just beginning their life pathways, they also stand at the very threshold of a societal institution—the educational system—that wields arguably the greatest power in setting and directing these life pathways.

Consider, therefore, this sequelae: 1) improving the prospects of the Mexican immigrant population is best served by improving the educational prospects of the children in this population, 2) making such improvements must be taken up by social policy, on the large and small scale, and 3) such policy must be constructed upon a solid foundation of knowledge about what helps and what hurts these children in the American educational system. The goal of this study is to pick up the third step in this sequelae as a means of promoting the first two. No less than the dreams of a population are at stake.

Immigration, Education, and Social Policy

So, children are the future and education matters. These are platitudes really, but, in the case of immigration from Mexico, they pack a most powerful truth. The modern American economy is often described as having a peculiarly hourglass shape, with broad strata of high-paying, stable jobs in the professions at the top, even broader strata of low-paying, insecure jobs in service and related sectors at the bottom, and very little in between (Hirschman, 2001; Wilson, 1991). In this hourglass economy, educational success, especially college and advanced degrees, is crucial to pushing through the bottleneck into the high-reward strata. In this way, education is the primary "conveyer

belt" to social mobility, even more so than in past historical eras (Adelman, 1999; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

Such mobility is, undoubtedly, a gradual, long-term process, one that plays out over decades of educational and occupational experiences. Regardless of the time frame, however, it is also a process that has enduring effects on the lives of individual Mexican-origin children as well as on the basic social and economic status of the Mexican-origin population as a whole. In short, educational success is a means by which Mexican immigrant parents' dreams for their children can be fulfilled, even if their own personal social status does not improve and even if the eventual social advantages accrued by their children take a lifetime to emerge (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

Given the potential significance of educational success as a solution to the paradox of immigration from the U.S.'s nearest neighbor to the South, the most pressing question, of course, becomes: how can we promote the educational success of children from Mexican immigrant families? As I have already mentioned, this goal requires social policy based on careful research detailing the successes and failures, risks and resources, and steps forward and backward of these children. The building of this crucial knowledge base is currently underway, actively constructed by sociologists, psychologists, economists, political scientists and the like. For this general knowledge base to be specifically policy-relevant, however, some fine-tuning is required.

First, we must build knowledge about the factors associated with educational success among children from Mexican immigrant families that coincide with *critical intervention points*. In other words, we need to identify tools that can be successfully leveraged at times when they are most likely to have long-term consequences. Decades

of educational and developmental research have demonstrated that key life transition points, including school transitions, are such critical periods (Entwisle & Alexander, 2002). Indeed, the transition into elementary school may be an especially fruitful time to intervene because it represents the very foundation of the educational career. It is the starting gate. It is where potential is still yet to be realized, when all avenues are more open than they will ever be.

Second, uncovering factors associated with educational successes and failures is always an important enterprise, but uncovering such factors that are also *policy-amenable* is especially valuable. For example, consider some interpersonal factor, such as emotional support from peers, that may be closely associated with academic functioning but is also exceedingly difficult to manipulate from the outside, even more so on a national scale. Research on this factor promotes knowledge about the educational process but is not especially helpful from a policy standpoint. Conversely, other personal or contextual factors that are more amenable to policy interventions—such as health and its amenability to health services, school context and its amenability to institutional reorganization—are useful from a policy standpoint even if they are not as powerfully related to academic functioning (Coleman, 1990; Millstein, 1988).

Third, our arsenal of scientific methods is indeed vast, and different weapons in this arsenal make their own unique contribution to the *multidimensional* enterprise of crafting empirically-based social policies aimed at reducing demographic inequalities in education (Bean & Stevens, 2003). Qualitative, community-based methods allow the careful elucidation of specific mechanisms of inequality and the rich understanding of particular groups within context, while experimental and quasi-experimental methods

allow the establishment of causal influences in processes of inequality. Large-scale, quantitative research promotes generalizability and the investigation of contextual variability, both of which help us to figure out what interventions are needed and which ones are most likely to have the broadest impact (Morgan, 2001; Coleman, 1990). All have their own value, and each needs to be pursued with that specific value in mind.

At the heart of this book is an empirical research study. The purpose of this study was to follow the guidelines just described in order to produce knowledge about the educational careers of children from Mexican immigrant families that can then be leveraged to inform social policy targeting the long-term social and economic prospects of this exponentially growing population. It is a theoretically-grounded, policy-focused study of the transition to elementary school that draws on nationally representative sample of children, sophisticated statistical methodology, and aspects of child development that are amenable to policy intervention. In the following section, I trace out the basic theoretical blueprint of this study.

Overview of the Study

In an influential monograph published by the Society for Research in Child Development in 1988, two sociologists of education, Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle, articulated one of the most comprehensive, and provocative, theoretical models of the transition into and through elementary school. This school transition model, which is a foundation of the now booming field of educational research on kindergarten and first grade entry (see Pianta & Cox, 1999), grew out of extensive research on elementary school students from diverse backgrounds in Baltimore, Maryland. Its general premise is that the well-documented and oft-discussed race, class, and other demographic disparities

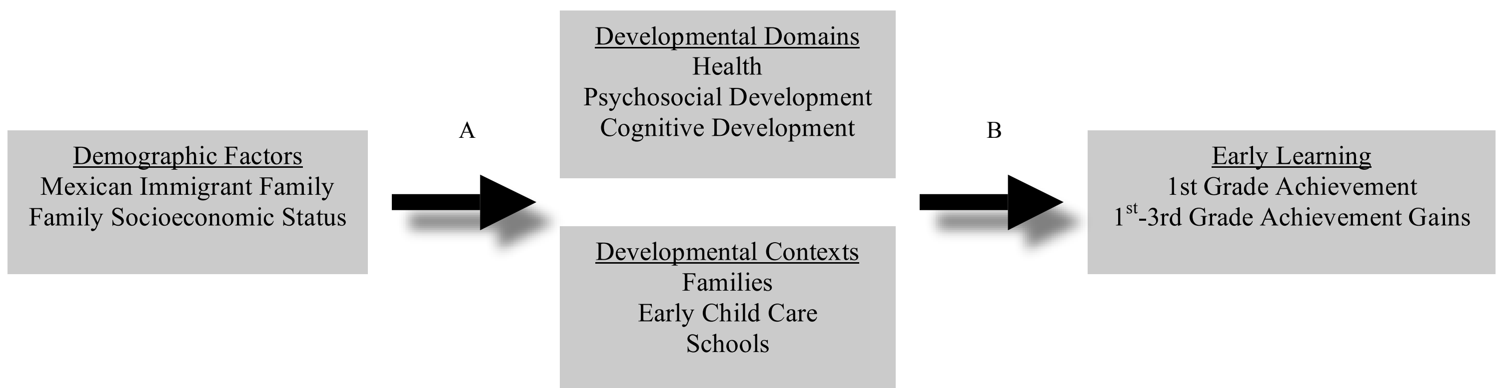
in educational attainment emerge out of experiences in the earliest years of schooling. Indeed, demographic differences in performance and learning are relatively narrow and highly malleable in the first two or three years of elementary school, but, over time, they slowly widen and eventually calcify. Consequently, interventions must target early differences to have an impact. The school transition model was designed to shed light on the roots of these early differences. These roots have less to do with intellectual abilities than with the general circumstances of children's lives. Specifically, the model contends that children from different demographic populations enter elementary school with sharp differences in personal, experiential, and social psychological factors (e.g., personal competencies, early enrichment, interpersonal support) that translate into small differences in early learning. These small early differences compound over time as initial performance sets teacher and peer expectations, influences class assignment, and affects self-evaluations. In this way, children from more disadvantaged populations lose ground to their peers until the cycle becomes self-reinforcing (Entwisle & Alexander, 2002, 1999, 1988). Thus, one of the most disheartening aspects of this model is also one of its most hopeful: inequality is a long time in the making but does not have to be so.

As already mentioned, the school transition model is the blueprint of this study. Obviously, Mexican immigrant status is the aspect of social background that drives my particular application of this model. In short, I have comprehensively analyzed the linkage between Mexican immigrant status and early learning in a nationally representative sample of American kindergarteners. This sample, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), was collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, a research wing of the federal government, precisely for

the national-level investigation of policy-relevant educational issues. The ins and outs of the ECLS-K data and how I analyzed these data are described in full in Chapter 2.

Following the school transition model, the basic premise of this study is that children from Mexican immigrant families enter school with wildly different life circumstances than their peers (see Path A in Figure 1). These circumstances are broken down into two general categories. The first category encompasses three different domains of child development. In other words, I look within children—at their individual characteristics, abilities, and behaviors—to understand differences in early learning between children from Mexican immigrant families and their peers; specifically their health, psychosocial development, and cognitive development (Chapter 3). The second category encompasses three different contexts of development. In other words, I look outside children—at the physical and interpersonal settings of their lives—to determine what differentiates children from Mexican immigrant families from their peers in the early years of schooling; specifically their families, experiences in early child care, and the elementary schools that they attend (Chapter 4).

Figure 1. School Transition Model for Children from Mexican Immigrant Families



Next, I attempted to determine whether these differences in children's general development and in the contexts in which this development occurs translate into

differences in early learning between children from Mexican immigrant families and their peers (see Path B in Figure 1). After comparing rates of learning in the first grade and then growth in learning between first and third grades of children from Mexican immigrant families and their native White, African-American, Asian-American, and other Latino/a peers, I assessed the degree to which any differences related to Mexican immigrant status were explained by concomitant differences in health, psychosocial development, cognitive development, family processes, early child care experiences, and elementary school contexts (Chapter 5). Some of these developmental and contextual factors were hypothesized to boost the relative standing of children from Mexican immigrant families, others were hypothesized to be obstacles to their school readiness and early learning. My primary task was to find out which mattered, how much they mattered, and in what ways they mattered.

Four Issues of Note

At the start of any large-scale study, difficult decisions need to be made about how things will progress, and this study was no different. I had to tailor the basic blueprint described above in several ways that deserve further comment. These decisions allowed me to execute this research effectively while staying true to its theoretical underpinnings and its policy-related objectives.

First, this study focuses exclusively on early learning in one subject: math. The reasons for this focus are both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, math is a core curriculum of elementary school and one that, unlike reading, maintains its curricular centrality up through high school and beyond. Success in math is crucial to performance on high-stakes tests, the accumulation of valued academic credentials, post-secondary

matriculation, and entry into the more rewarded sectors of the hourglass economy at the end of school (Adelman, 1999; Stevenson, Schiller, & Schneider, 1994). Practically, the Mexican-origin children in ECLS-K were allowed to take math achievement tests (but not other kinds of achievement tests) in Spanish if they did not have good English language proficiency. Consequently, math is the one academic arena in which their skill level can be adequately assessed independent of their language skills. Thus, certain circumstances warrant a more narrow academic focus than I would have liked, but that one focus happens to be of the utmost importance.

Second, I have collapsed together two groups—first generation children (those born in Mexico to Mexican-born parents) and second generation children (those born in the U.S. to Mexican-born parents)—that, in adolescence-focused research, are generally examined separately (Hernandez, 2004; Harris, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Recall, however, that the focus of this study is on very young children. Even at a maximum, a second generation child could not have lived in the U.S. much longer than a first generation child, and the amount of time that a first generation child could have lived in Mexico is small. What connects them is a very important commonality. Both first and second generation children are being raised in the U.S. by parents who were born in Mexico. For this reason, I borrow the terminology of the Suarez-Orozcos as well as the National Academy of Sciences, leaders in research on the development of immigrant children, and refer to first and second generation children together as children from Mexican immigrant families.

Third, the primary concern of this study is the potential for differences in various domains and contexts of child development related to Mexican immigration to translate

into corresponding differences in early learning. This focus, while broad, appears to leave out a major "culprit" in the creation and reinforcement of such differences, namely the socioeconomic circumstance of the family. We know that Mexican immigrants have more negative socioeconomic circumstances—such as fewer years of schooling, lower income, less prestigious jobs—than other Americans. Moreover, I will hardly surprise the reader by stating that socioeconomic circumstances are closely related to different aspects of child development, including school adjustment and achievement (Sewell & Hauser, 1981). Rest assured, therefore, that socioeconomic status will be taken into account in this study. More specifically, the contributions of immigrant status and family socioeconomic status will always be carefully delineated, whether looking at health, school enrollment, math learning, or anything else. Doing so allows me to assess the degree to which the "effects" of immigrant status on children's lives are channeled through their socioeconomic circumstances, which, in turn, allows more careful consideration of where intervention should be targeted.

Fourth, the conclusions drawn in this study are the product of extensive and complex quantitative analysis of an enormous data set. The statistical models estimated here, and the results that they produced, are indeed voluminous. In such a situation, one is left with the choice of whether to comprehensively present the "numbers" or to draw a basic picture from these numbers and leave the actual statistics more or less in the background. I chose the latter approach. All aspects of quantitative methodology are included in the Appendix, and I have used the main chapters to tell a complicated story in a straightforward way with narrative, some tables, and illustrative figures. This approach

allows me to appeal to diverse audiences while also engaging in the scientific version of full disclosure.

Some Final Words of Introduction

Having set the stage with a basic introductory description of my study, including the four issues just outlined above, I now turn to my actual investigation of the learning of children from Mexican immigrant families at the very start of their educational careers in the American educational system. Let me be perfectly clear at the onset: this study is not working from some sort of “deficit” model that blames inequality on Mexican immigrant families themselves, nor is it working from a “revolutionary” model intended to pull the cloak off the systemic forces at work in creating this inequality. Instead, it works from the premise that the inequality facing children from Mexican immigrant families exists and is years in the making and then assesses what will happen to this inequality if we target certain areas of their lives and their environments for help and assistance.

Yes, the design of this study is indeed complex, and so is the story it tells. At its core, however, is the very simple aim of putting us in the business of ensuring that the dreams that bring people to the U.S. become something else entirely: reality.