

Negotiating Two cultures: Accommodation and Resistance of Latinas with Respect to the Education of their Children in Chicago

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Surviving in a culture different from one's own requires a variety of adjustments in ways of thinking and behaving. Many immigrants to the United States have made this transition, assimilating to the new culture, forgetting their mother tongue and becoming "Americans." Many recent Latino immigrants, especially Mexicans, have attempted to accommodate to U.S. mainstream culture without assimilating, thus trying to maintain their own language and customs. The use of the term transnational communities in relation to Mexican immigrants is appropriate not only because many Mexican immigrants return regularly to their communities in Mexico, but also because even within the mainland United States, they manage to recreate many of the cultural patterns of their home communities. Of course, the presence of Mexican Americans throughout the United States, frequently concentrated in particular geographic areas of the country and neighborhoods of major cities, facilitates this process of cultural reproduction. Moreover, in many areas of the United States it is unclear exactly where the US/Mexican border really lies given the connections between peoples on both sides and the economic linkages that bind these communities together.

Nevertheless, accommodation without assimilation is a process that is not easy to balance and cannot be undertaken without conflicts. For immigrant parents this is especially the case in relation to the education and upbringing of their children. Many Mexican parents experience great conflicts in trying to raise their children as Mexicans in the environment of cities like Chicago, especially when urban institutions such as schools, the media and peer culture attract youth in opposite directions. Parents want their children to benefit from the opportunities provided by their new culture but at the same time they want to transmit values inherent in their own culture and traditions, values which they often consider superior to those of the North American mainstream.

This paper addresses how a group of Latina mothers, primarily Mexican, and teachers perceive this conflict and how they have tried to address it. The paper is based on results of interviews with Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers, grandmothers and teachers in which they speak about identity, education in the United States, and raising children to survive in the urban environment. An important theme in these interviews is the concept of "respeto" -- how they define it, how much importance they give to it, and what conflicts they experience in trying to inculcate it in the younger generation.

The educational problems of Latinos in U. S. schools

The number of minority students in urban areas in the United States has continued to increase to such a high level that in many cities minorities constitute a majority. One place in which the impact of these demographic changes is most evident is in the schools. Students of color, including Latinos, constitute the majority in the 25 largest school districts of the United

States and it is projected that for the year 2010, these children will constitute the largest group in the 50 principal cities of this country (Lisack, 1987). It is also projected that Latinos will be the majority group among the minorities at the beginning of the next century in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. Over 60% of all Latinos are of Mexican ancestry.

The latest statistics from Chicago schools indicate that the Latino population is 31%, with the majority of these being Mexicans. The 1997 Chicago school census shows that there are 61,653 children with limited English proficiency (LEP) in the public schools, and over 50,000 of these are Spanish speakers. In many Chicago schools Mexican students constitute more than 90% of the school population, and in some even over 95%. This situation can be considered a crisis when we take into account that only 8% of the teachers are Latinos, and although there are 1825 bilingual teachers in Chicago schools, almost 1000 of these are working with provisional teaching certificates (CPS Office of Language & Cultural Education, 1997). In addition to the large number of Latinos in the city schools, the statistics for their academic achievement are quite disturbing. In general, Latino youth underachieve in relation to non-Latino whites. In some schools it is estimated that their dropout rate is almost 70% (Perez-Miller, 1991).

Many programs have been developed to address the problems of academic under achievement of this student population. One of the most extensive of these initiatives has been bilingual/multicultural education. The argument for these programs is that the best way to develop academic concepts is through the native language. While children are learning English, they can also be learning the other material in the curriculum: mathematics, sciences, history, without having to wait till knowing English in order to study those areas. In addition, bilingual advocates recommend that the teaching should be carried out with recognition and respect for the culture and traditions of the families and communities (Cummins, 1981; Padilla et al., 1990). They also assert that the collaboration and participation of the parents is important for the academic progress of the children. These parents should become involved in the schools and in helping their children with their homework. This is another argument in favor of bilingual education - namely, that if children are taught in the mother tongue, parents can help their children since they also know the language.

In various school systems programs have been initiated to involve parents and members of the community in the educational development of their children. For example, parent training workshops have been created with federal, state or local funds in order to build bridges between schools and homes. The main focus of these workshops is to socialize parents into the expectations of U.S. schools; for example, to teach them how to read to their children, how to interpret a report card, how to insure that children do their homework, and how to become partners with teachers in the educational process. In general, the organizers of these workshops assume that the values of the school are the legitimate ones, and they give very little recognition to the possibility that the values of the home, which may be different from those of the school, are nevertheless important for the academic progress of the children.

Mexican parents who immigrated to urban areas confront cultural conflicts in preparing their children for the reality of these educational systems. In the first place, the school philosophy assumes that there is an appropriate way for parents to participate in the education of their children: namely, that parents who care about education will attend school meetings, become volunteers in the classroom, participate in field trips to help the teacher, insure that their children will come prepared for school with the necessary materials, and attend punctually and regularly with few absences. Many Mexican parents are unaware of the level of participation

expected of them. It is also difficult for them to balance the school expectations with the maintenance of the home and their other responsibilities, especially work responsibilities. Frequently members of these immigrant families may hold multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. Moreover, the role that parents are expected to play in the U.S. educational structure differs in some significant ways from the role that Mexican society expects of parents (Valdes, 1996).

Many of these parents try to orient themselves to understand the expectations of the school, to learn how to make the best decisions vis a vis the education of their children in situations in which they have some freedom to select an academic program for them. For example, parents can elect to place their children in a bilingual program where they receive part of their instruction in English and part in Spanish, or in a monolingual program where they receive all their instruction in English. They can enroll their children in the local neighborhood school or elect to have them bused to a magnet school or a school with a particular thematic focus, such as mathematics or science. If they elect a monolingual program, they have to consider how they can support the maintenance of the home language if this is not taught to the children in the school. However, a greater set of conflicts is related to how to protect their children against the problems of the “ghetto”, crime, drugs, gangs, teen pregnancy, etc. In addition, mothers confront the dilemma of how to prepare themselves for new roles and responsibilities and how to balance those with more traditional roles.

Theoretical Framework

There are two concepts which I would like to develop in this paper: first "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) and second “accommodation without assimilation” (Ogbu, 1991). Both concepts appear frequently in educational literature and are key for educators interested in developing a broader understanding of Latino students and their families and adapting instruction congruent with such understandings.

The term “funds of knowledge” refers to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being “(Moll et al., 1992: 134). This concept and the research direction being pursued by Moll and associates with Mexican families in Arizona present a theoretical framework which challenges deficit models of Latino communities (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Moll & Greenberg 1990; Moll et al., 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg 1992). An important assumption underlying the funds of knowledge concept is that the families in the community know many things, have many skills, yet this wisdom is generally not recognized by the mainstream or by educators.

The project being carried out by these researchers seeks to involve teachers in the study of the practices which exist in the homes with the goal of creating curricula which utilize that knowledge as a base. A goal of the project is to demonstrate that there are many important skills which children learn in their homes, that parents have knowledge which should be recognized in the school environment and which can be capitalized upon for curriculum development.

The concept "accommodation without assimilation" comes from some of the writings of Ogbu (1992), in which he explores the differences between immigrant and involuntary minorities and how members of both groups attempt to negotiate their reality in the United States context. Members of minority groups who manage to survive and perhaps succeed may have learned how

to accommodate without assimilating, adopting certain behavior patterns in the new country which are necessary for getting ahead without relinquishing their own culture. They may have learned how to live in the context of the mainstream culture while at the same time affirming their own background and culture. They have learned how to negotiate dual identities.

Review of the literature

The literature and research on Mexican migration is quite extensive and continues to grow on issues related to women's roles and children's education (Bernal & Night, 1993; Davis, 1990; Facio, 1996; Griswold del Castillo & De Leon, 1996; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Lopez Castro, 1986, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Suarez-Orozco, 1991, 1995). Much of this literature addresses the conflicts that these families face in adapting to their new community, analyzing the economic, political and cultural factors that facilitate or constrain that adaptation. Valdés' (1996) ethnographic study of ten Mexican families on the U.S. side of the Mexican border explored how they formed a community and what strategies they developed to deal with the problems caused by the immigration. She focused on themes related to the discontinuity between socialization in the home and the expectations of the school, demonstrating that children learn many things in the home which are rarely acknowledged or recognized by educators. She also demonstrated how the values of the parents differed from those of educators. For example, among poor Mexican families each child had certain work responsibilities at home, and often it was considered more important to fulfill that responsibility to family members than to complete homework. One example of such responsibilities was the child who was expected to accompany his mother to the doctor to serve as translator even if it meant missing school. An eight year old who is engaged in translating for a parent is developing a rather sophisticated skill, yet the teacher may only conclude that the parent is jeopardizing the child's education by encouraging absenteeism.

In research carried out in Chicago, Carger (1996) studied a Mexican family, describing their efforts to provide a good education for their children, especially their oldest son. The family faced significant difficulties in dealing with an unresponsive school system, including a parochial school. As a result of the experiences that the son had in high school, the parents concluded that it was preferable to have him drop out of school and go to work than to continue to confront the dangers of the gang culture in the school and surroundings.

Other investigators have focused their studies on the strategies used by Mexican parents to educate their children. Some of these research studies have addressed the theme of discontinuities between the home and the school, and the issue of why Mexican children have a lower level of educational achievement than mainstream white students. Matute-Bianchi (1991) addresses the theme of diversity within the Mexican community, comparing recent Mexican immigrants with several groups of Mexican American adolescents, such as Chicanos. Chicanos who adopt an oppositional stance to the school as a reaction to mistreatment and racism have lower academic progress than more recent immigrants who may have a greater faith in education as a route for socio-economic mobility, and therefore may be more willing to conform to the school culture and expectations.

Suarez Orozco (1991) identified the concept of dual frame of reference to explain why some immigrants progress more than others. Those who have resided a longer time in the United States, such as Chicanos, compare their condition with the Anglo majority and conclude that they

are worse off than their Anglo peers. Those who are new immigrants compare themselves to those who remained behind in the other country, and even though their own condition may not be very good, they conclude that they are still better off than they were previously. The latter conclude that with effort and work their own situation will improve, and are therefore more willing to make sacrifices to achieve their goals.

Methodology

This article presents the results of interviews with Mexican mothers and Puerto Rican grandmothers. The interviewees consisted of twelve individuals from two communities in Chicago, one on the south side and one on the north side. The Mexican mothers, who were from 30-45 years old, reside in the Pilsen area, a predominantly Mexican community in the south side of Chicago. Many of the schools have a Mexican student population of over 90% and very extensive bilingual programs. Some of the schools, in collaboration with the University of Illinois-Chicago, also offer a program of English instruction for parents of young children who attend the school. The Mexican mothers interviewed for this article had participated in that program. The Pilsen area has Mexican families that have lived there for many years as well as more recent migrants. It is one of the first areas that receives new Mexican immigrants into Chicago and has many Mexican businesses that offer services to the community. The examples from this article are taken primarily from the interviews with these Mexican mothers, who were interviewed in their homes.

The Puerto Rican women interviewed ranged from 66 to 81 years of age and reside in the north of Chicago, in a residential senior citizen complex in a neighborhood that although more diverse than Pilsen, nevertheless contains a significant concentration of Puerto Ricans. In general the Puerto Rican interviewees have a longer residence in Chicago than the Mexican interviewees. Some arrived after World War II during the 40s, raised their children in the city, and now were observing how their grandchildren and great grandchildren were being raised. I became acquainted with these women through another project that I was engaged in, collecting oral histories and family narratives from these women, stories of their lives in Puerto Rico and memories of their migration to the United States. Some of the grandmothers were also participating in an intergenerational project with school age children, in which the children were also interviewing them.

In addition to the interviews with these mothers and grandmothers, I also interviewed two educators who work with Latina mothers in one of the parent training programs sponsored by the university. These educators were also university graduate students and knew the schools and communities well. They too were carrying out studies of Latino families and their relations to the schools. The interviews with these two educators also helped confirm and amplify some of the anecdotes told by the mothers, especially the conflicts with school administrators.

In addition to the formal interviews, I have had many conversations with teachers from schools with heavy Latino populations in order to explore how these educators evaluate the learning of their Latino students, and what expectations they have about the role that parents should play in relation to the schools. As a university professor whose primary responsibility is to prepare teachers for Chicago schools, including bilingual teachers, I have many opportunities to dialogue with teachers and administrators of Latino students and to observe classroom

instruction. These are also opportunities to become acquainted with the educational problems that these students face and the measures taken by schools to address these.

The interview guide included questions for initiating a conversation and obtaining anecdotes of personal experiences of the mothers on themes related to their values, the schools and the education of their children. Some examples of the questions were: Did you ever have an experience in which you had to make a decision about your children's education and you did not know what to do? How did you resolve it? If you were to advise newly arrived Mexican mothers about their children's education in Chicago, what would you advise them? Do you find that it is more difficult to educate children here or in Mexico (or Puerto Rico)? What do you think is important for parents to teach their children? (The complete questionnaire is in the Appendix to this article.) I analyzed the content of the transcriptions of the interviews to identify themes and patterns in the responses, conflicts identified by the women and solutions that they had found or would recommend to others. The article includes examples of these conflicts, their solutions or the opinions of the mothers.

Discussion

The funds of knowledge of a community are found in the way that members of families or a community organize themselves to deal with economic and socio-political challenges. The interviews revealed funds of knowledge based on the creative strategies that these mothers developed to negotiate their new environment. The cultural capital is evident in the way that members of the community negotiate their roles and responsibilities to create new patterns of relationships and in the way they resort to their cultural values to create solutions for new problems. When families and communities are removed from their geographic roots, as is the case with the migration experience, it is imperative for members of these communities to expand these funds of knowledge so they can be effective in the new environment. Children raised in the extended family experience a variety of strategies for negotiating the economic, political and social reality created by these changes. The knowledge, skills, and values that they learn from their elders are important resources for their development.

In the interviews with Mexican mothers and other Latinas who have worked with them, one becomes aware of the funds of knowledge that exist among the members of the community and in the way they rely on these funds to survive in the new culture. For these women the migration experience has been very significant. For some the migration has been a watershed for the redefinition of roles and identities. Some have organized information and mutual support networks in Chicago. All have had to deal with multiple bureaucracies: schools for their children, hospitals for medical care, landlords for apartments, employers for jobs, merchants for their daily needs and often in a new language, English.

Identity and language

An important theme in the interviews was Mexican and Puerto Rican identity. All the women interviewed wanted their children to maintain their ethnic or national identity even if they were American citizens. All also affirmed the importance of the use of Spanish as a symbol of that identity. Perhaps this explains their support for bilingual education in their children's schools. All valued the fact that their children or grandchildren would be able to become bilingual by means of this type of instruction. Several of the mothers spoke of the importance of

the Spanish orientation for the children, especially those who were newly arrived. The also spoke of the importance of their being able to help their younger children with school work if the work was in Spanish since none had a strong command of English. Some commented that their children would learn English easily, but would have greater difficulty in maintaining Spanish or making progress in school tasks without their help. Laura, (all names are pseudonyms), for example, explained that she always insisted that her children speak Spanish in the home because she was afraid that her daughter would lose the language on making the transition to the all English program. A frequent practice among the children was that relatively soon after making the transition to the English program they would begin to speak English at home and it is not strange to notice that they begin to lose control of Spanish and to respond to their parents in English. The mothers considered this to be a “falta de respeto” or absence of respect because even though they want their children to learn English, they judge that it is not appropriate for their children to speak it at home with the parents or grandparents.

Mothers, workers and entrepreneurs

For some of the women in the community it has been imperative to supplement their husband’s income if the family is to survive in the city. However, in addition to these responsibilities, they also have the expectation of continuing to fulfill the roles and responsibilities that may have been traditional for them as wives and mothers in Mexico. And since the support networks of the extended family are not always available, as was the case in Mexico, several have developed creative solutions to negotiate their new environment with new responsibilities.

The experience of some of the mothers in the upbringing of their children serve as an example of the concept of accommodation without assimilation. Although she had to work to supplement her husband’s income, doña Carmen began to worry upon becoming aware of the behavior of the youth in the neighborhood when mothers worked outside the home. She spoke about the lack of shame (“poca verguenza”), especially among adolescents who would return to their apartments to have parties when their parents were absent. She decided that she did not want to endanger her own children by leaving them on their own while she worked.

She quit her job in a factory and decided to remain home, become involved in activities in the school, appear often at school so that people would get to know her and so that her children and their peers would notice her presence. However, she also needed to bring in some income. Since she was a good cook, she decided to establish a small business in her home, cooking. She described how she would wake up at 5 am to prepare the meals to sell. By the time that her children were ready for school, the meals were also ready for sale. During the holidays, such as at Christmas, she would earn quite a bit of money preparing the typical foods. This alternative was a creative way to capitalize on her cultural traditions, her funds of knowledge, to negotiate and address the problems of her new environment.

Clara, one of the teachers who worked with mothers in a parent training program, gives the example of how the Mexican mothers become small entrepreneurs to earn money to supplement their husband’s income without having to leave their homes and thus remaining present to protect their children.

When we had our writing sessions, some of the mothers would bring their business with them. Some would sell...hairpins...for little girls, chains, jewelry, Avon products; one lady kept the trunk of her car filled with clothing and after our meetings she would take out the clothes and would let all the other women look and I used to think at first this can be a little bit annoying... but at the same time...they were selling this not only to the other trainers but to the other parents and probably other people in the community that they came into contact with. Project X just seemed to be another route, another way of doing business.. and they're giving something to the community that some people want or need at reasonable prices and it's right there in the community...around Christmas they would make Christmas tree ornaments...this was very popular...they would buy towels for cheap and they would embroider the towels. It was business.

Clara became aware that many mothers would use the occasion of a school meeting to get clients for their sales merchandise. Over the course of time, she came to understand the reason for this practice and to admire the initiative of the mothers who worried so much about their children that they developed other ways of earning income without having to work outside the home and thereby be aware of what was happening in the school.

Andrea, another teacher, also commented on this practice:

Many sell things, one sells flowers, another jewelry, all of them have worked...in California, in the fields, in different things...many of them wanted to continue to work but they didn't have the help they had in Mexico, here without the support of their community; yes, they think it's very important to remain home...so they sell things...and use the money for their children, not for themselves.

These mothers have learned new roles and have maintained their cultural identity and traditions in an environment which gives less support for these. As Andrea explained, in Mexico they could depend on their relatives for many things, including the care and upbringing of their children. When they moved to Chicago not all of them could count on these extended family networks.

School involvement: accommodation and resistance

Sometimes it is necessary to make some accommodations or compromises in order to resist other situations. For example, some of the mothers affirmed that they became volunteers in the classroom in order to see what actually occurred and then be able to complain to the principal if they were not satisfied. Norma gives the example of the experience that she had with her son's second grade teacher:

A year ago they had a teacher who aside from the fact that he got the best group at his level, he passed on the worst group at his level... I think it depends on the teachers...On discipline, in their teaching, in the way they make themselves respected...for example once I told him "Oh teacher, I wear the pants better than you do!"...Yes, because it was a matter that the children, the girls would say to him, "What do you think teacher? You should not give an opinion; you should not get involved. I said to him, "Oh, teacher, in order to be a teacher I know that you need various years of study. Did you study to stand

there and not let them respect you?" (Spanish versions of some quotes are in the Appendix).

For her it was important to be a volunteer in the classroom to observe well what was occurring and to have some influence on what her son was learning or otherwise complain to the administration. Her example demonstrates the efforts of this mother to insure that the values of the home and the culture are also taught in the school. Since the teacher was also Latino and much of the instruction in the class was in Spanish, Norma was able to become involved in the educational process of the school. She also had the freedom to express herself to the teacher in a way that perhaps would be considered unusual for a Mexican mother in addressing a professional in Mexico.

Andrea recounted another experience in which the mothers demonstrated their resistance to the official authorities of the school. Each school in Chicago has a parent advisory council with opportunities to review the budget of the school and to make recommendations concerning the use of certain school funds. Many of the schools in Chicago were making plans to buy metal detectors as protection against weapons in the school. A group of mothers found out that the administrators of their primary school were making similar plans. They were opposed to the use of school funds in this way, arguing that they did not see a danger in their primary school and that there were better uses for these funds. On one occasion, while these plans were being debated, one of the administrators, very dramatically, placed a gun to the head of one of the mothers to demonstrate the danger her children would be up against without the metal detectors. Although it was only a toy gun, the mothers were outraged with the administrator for the use of this tactic, they organized and demanded from the central administration that he be dismissed. He was eventually transferred to another position.

Once they have adapted to a certain extent to U. S. norms of parent participation in the schools, resistance to other situations becomes possible. Clara recounted other examples in which some of the mothers organized themselves to make demands on school authorities. I asked her what advice these mothers gave those recently arrived from Mexico.

The most important thing that they tell the new participants is to come in and get involved with the school, to attend the LSC meetings and they say..." Don't be afraid to let the principal know how you feel about something." I remember they felt there should be a safety patrol on this corner because these cars were not stopping, they negotiated that, ...it was a group of 18 mothers that marched to the principal's office...they just marched to the office one day...and they just walked in and complained and as far as I know there's a patrol person there now for the kids.

This form of protest was organized by the mothers themselves without the direction of outside leaders. To a certain extent this form of protest is foreign to their identity as homemakers but it also symbolizes not only accommodation to new patterns of behavior, but also resistance and struggle in favor of their children.

Respect and resistance to official authorities

In one aspect of the upbringing of their children, these mothers had serious conflicts in negotiating their roles as mothers living in the United States. This was in teaching the concept of

respect. Respect was the cultural value that they emphasized most in the upbringing of their children, the behavior of their spouses, teachers and others. Respect from their children entails obedience to parental directives, frequently without challenges.

Norma recounted an anecdote that shows her effort to instill respect from her son and implied resistance to official authorities. Various mothers had commented that in the United States children get the impression that they can report their parents to the police if they are opposed to something that the parents are doing. This impression is based on the fact that telephone Help Lines have been set up to counter physical and sexual abuse against minors. Some mothers have the impression that children can complain about their parents for any reason, and that the parents have little defense against these accusations. Norma recounted the following as an example of a conflict in raising children in the United States and the difference with Mexico. With a great deal of emotion and passion, she said that if her son would tell her:

I'm going to speak with the police to tell them that you don't let me go out. I'll say to him, "OK, but the police is not going to come to do here in my home what are my norms, my rules, he can do that in the street but...in the first place you are not old enough, in the second place I don't let you go out because I take you someplace else where you can be." ...because I think that in school there comes a moment when they talk to the children and tell them, "You have rights". Yes, they have rights but my son is not going to blackmail me by saying "I'm going to tell the police that you don't let me go out to the sidewalk to play ball." I think, with what nerve is the police going to come and tell me, "Yes, let him go because he has a right." He doesn't have a right because in the first place he's a minor, in the second place I am protecting him from some danger of a gang, of a car...then I think that many parents, either don't care to say "OK, call the police and have them come and I'll talk" It's almost as if the parents also fear the police and therefore for that reason they say, "OK, go out." It's as if one as a parent doesn't know one's rights and one's children blackmail you. In Mexico it's different.

In spite of the fact that many families fear police officials, especially if family members are undocumented, this mother distinguished between the public authority and the private authority of the home. In the home it is the parents who have the responsibility to teach respect, to demonstrate their authority. And this mother is not willing to abdicate this responsibility, not even to the police!

Flight from urban violence

In spite of the generally favorable comments that these mothers gave about the education of their children, they also worried about what would happen when their children reached high school. The most significant concern has to do with the presence of gangs in high schools and the pressure that children experience, especially sons, to identify with one gang or another. All the mothers had examples of the type of peer pressure that adolescents would receive in high school. Norma said,

A nephew left school, apart from the fact that he was a little lazy, he left because of the pressure of the boys from the gangs, because the poor fellow could not even go and buy himself something because he would be pushed, they would take away his things, they

would take their cigarette and would push it against him like this. Then he left school and went to work at 17 because he couldn't stand it.

And Marta agreed because she had heard of other similar situations with a nephew.

We are seeing another change in him because they ask him to what gang he belongs; why he wears his hair like this, some tell him he has to shave it like this, and when he goes to another class, I don't understand this, some children push him, they bother him because he wears his hair like this, that he should wear it like this...and about the clothes, well they have to wear uniforms, right, but they ask why they saw him in the street one day with clothes like this? And why was he wearing those colors? So my husband...now that he sees these problems says that when our son gets to that grade he will send him to Mexico or I will go with him.

Many of the families have to confront these decisions because of fear of gangs in the schools or in the neighborhoods. Therefore, adolescence is a critical decision point in the life of these families, whether to stay in the area as a family, or whether to send their teenage children, especially their sons, to the community from which they came in Mexico, and even whether to withdraw them from school altogether to protect them against gang violence and pressure. As they attempt to make these decisions, they also weigh the pros and cons of schooling in the States. Norma and Marta, for example, argued that although returning to Mexico would seem like a solution, at the same time they would be denying their children the educational advantages which are offered in the States: computers, public libraries accessible to all, sports programs in local parks, etc.

Carger (1996) addresses the same problem in her book, *Of Borders and Dreams*. Alma, the mother in the family, complains about the problems that her son has in high school and the decision that she and her husband intend to make to allow him to drop out of school.

We are very frustrated and very sad. This makes my husband ill. But we think that at least if he goes to work instead of going to school, he will be far away from these bad boys. I know that they are gang members.

Carger compares Alma's dilemma with that of Juana in Steinbeck's novel, *The Pearl*. Juana wanted to throw the pearl back in the sea since she had lost hope that it would bring anything good. Because of urban dangers, Alma had lost hope for a future with a good education for her son. In light of the challenges to his safety, the decision to allow him to withdraw from school seemed a rational one.

Transnationalism and school norms

One of the characteristics of the Mexican community in several parts of the United States is its transnational nature. Members of the community are living almost simultaneously in both societies, frequently making trips to their ranchos or towns in Mexico for family celebrations, funerals, holidays or other purposes. The transnational nature of their life style often becomes a source of conflict for these families in relation to their children's schooling. One of the problems about which teachers complain is that many Mexican children are absent from school often because they return to Mexico for weeks or months at a time during the school year. As a result

of this absenteeism, the teachers claim that these children fall behind in their schoolwork. Some of the mothers mentioned that the number of families that return to Mexico for extended periods of time is not large. Nevertheless, Marta agreed that many of the children are absent from school for various weeks around December and January and that teachers and administrators complain about it.

Though I have been unable to obtain official statistics about the magnitude of this problem in the schools, it seems serious enough that teachers complain and administrators establish attendance policies and send home notices informing the parents of the consequences of pulling their children out of school for days at a time. Marta and Norma discussed this matter during the interview. Norma commented on the new principal of her children's school:

Now this new principal became quite strict, that if they are absent more than one week they would have to repeat the course...

Marta focused on the possible consequences of children's absences:

But didn't you receive the notice from the school that gives the laws that now if children are absent more than I don't know how many days they will send you to court? It's a law of the state...you have to bring proof about why they were absent, and if you don't inform the school, they will send you to court.

In the United States we frequently seek solutions to problems through threats of lawsuits! But this situation causes problems for many families who return to Mexico because of family matters, some health or economic crisis, a death in the family, or only because of the custom of being present for major holidays which are not celebrated in Chicago. Unfortunately, neither the school systems in Mexico nor those in the United States have found acceptable solutions to deal with this dilemma.

Summary and conclusions

The women interviewed for this study had many ideas in common in relation to the education of their children. These interviews show that these mothers and grandmothers have developed a series of strategies to deal with the conflicts and realities created by the urban environment of Chicago. They recognize the importance of their role in relation to the education of their children, but they have also begun to understand the need for certain accommodations to the new environment. These accommodations include involving themselves in the activities of the school, resorting to their funds of knowledge to develop strategies for confronting the socioeconomic conflicts and their changing roles as mothers, housewives and wage earners, resisting official authorities when necessary to defend their own values and traditions, and attempting to inculcate and transmit their cultural values to a new generation, in spite of the pressure from those who share a different set of values. Nevertheless, they are not always able to resolve the conflicts, especially when their children become adolescents and the pressure of the urban environment increase. In those situations flight seems like the only viable option.

There are serious and fundamental problems which cannot be resolved without attacking the economic and political causes which arise in the urban context. For example, gang violence

is a symptom of other problems whose solution does not rest only in the context of the school and the home.

Nevertheless while the politicians and community leaders explore solutions, there are projects that can be developed among educators to seek more immediate or limited solutions to some of the educational issues in the schools. For example, while the parents are learning how the educational system functions, it is important that teachers develop a better understanding of the cultural values that the parents hold dear.

An interesting project undertaken by the University of Illinois-Chicago serves as an example of what educational institutions can do to improve this cultural knowledge. Under a Fulbright sponsored project, a group of Chicago teachers spent the summer of 1997 in Michoacan, Mexico, the state of origin for many Mexican immigrants to Chicago, studying elements of the culture from which their students come. One purpose of this trip for the teachers was to develop curriculum units for schools in Chicago, using the culture of the region as a base for teaching academic concepts.

Since one of the concerns of the teachers and administrators was school absenteeism when Mexican families return to Mexico, another interest of the teachers was to explore possible assignments and projects that children could undertake during those periods of trips back home. The argument has been made that if middle class white children can travel to Europe for a month or a semester and this is generally considered a wonderful and intellectually enriching experience, the same orientation can be developed for Mexican children who return to their ranchos or towns, if schools are conscious of the educational opportunities that this experience can provide and plan accordingly. Is it possible for Mexican children to research the funds of knowledge of members of their own communities in Mexico? Is it possible to help these children understand that their Mexican relatives possess knowledge that can also be incorporated into the curriculum? In a certain sense, these teachers want to create junior anthropologists who will develop their observation skills and become conscious of the values of their own society. In this way they want to demonstrate that it is possible for immigrants to accommodate to a new culture while at the same time continuing to develop knowledge and appreciation of the native one, and to transmit cultural values to a new generation.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. How many children do you have in the schools here and in what grade are they?
2. Did any of your children attend schools in Mexico?
3. Do you think there are differences between schools in Mexico and those of Chicago? If so, what are they?
4. Do you find that it is more difficult to raise children here or in Mexico? In what way? What difficulties exist here to raise your children? And there?
5. What do you think is important for parents to teach their children?
6. Is there any difference between what teachers should teach children and what parents should teach them? What?
7. Have you had any experience in which you had to make a decision about your child's education and you didn't know what to do? How did you resolve the problem?
8. What have you done to help your children in school? Have you had any frustrations in dealing with the school system?
9. If you were to give advice to Mexican parents (especially mothers) recently arrived in Chicago about the education of their children here in Chicago, what would you advise them?

Spanish Version of selected interviews

Hace un año les tocó el maestro que aparte de que le entregaron el mejor grupo a ese nivel, entregó el peor grupo de ese nivel... yo pienso que consiste bastante en los maestros...En la disciplina, en la enseñanza, en el modo de darse a respetar el maestro..incluso yo una vez le dije, "Hay maestro, tengo más pantalones yo que usted!"...Sí, porque era una cosa que los niños, las niñas le decían, "Usted qué dice maestro? Usted no opine; Usted ni se fije ni se meta."...yo le dije, "Hay maestro, para ser maestro yo sé que necesitan aquí varios años de estudio. ¿Usted estudió para ponerse ahí y que no lo respeten?"

Voy a hablarle a la policía que tú no me dejas salir." Yo le digo, "Ok, que la policía no va a venir a hacer aquí en mi casa lo que es mis normas, mis reglas, él va a mantener en la calle pero... en primer lugar tú no tienes edad, en segundo no te dejas salir porque yo te llevo a otro lugar que puedes estar...porque yo pienso que en la escuela llega un momento en que les hablan y les dicen ..."Ustedes tienen derechos." Sí, tienen derechos, pero mi hijo no me va a chantajear porque va a decir "Voy a hablarle a la policía porque tú no me dejas salir a la banqueta a jugar pelota." Pienso yo ¿con qué cara va a venir la policía a decirme a mí., "Sí, déjelo porque él tiene derecho?" No tiene derecho porque en primero es menor de edad, en segundo lo estoy previniendo de un peligro de una ganga, de un peligro de un carro...entonces pienso que muchos padres, o no tienen, con decir "ok llama a la policía, que venga y yo hablo." Como que le tienen también los padres miedo a la policía y entonces por eso dicen ok sal." Como que también uno de padre no sabe sus derechos de padre y el hijo lo chantajea a uno. En México es diferente...

Un sobrino se salió, aparte de que era flojito, por la presión de los muchachos de las gangas, porque también el pobre que no podía ni ir a comprarse algo porque era de

empujones, le quitaban sus cosas...pasaban con el cigarro y le puchaban el cigarro y así. Entonces él se salió y luego se metió a trabajar a los 17 años porque él no pudo.

...estamos viendo otro cambio en él porque le preguntan que de qué ganga es; por qué trae el pelo así, unos le dicen que se lo tiene que pelar así, y cuando va a otra clase, yo no entiendo esto, unos muchachos que lo puchan, lo avientan porque trae el pelo así, que debe de traerlo así ...que por qué la ropa, bueno allí hay que llevar uniforme, verdad, pero que por qué en la calle lo vieron tal día con una ropa así? que ¿por qué llevaba esos colores? Entonces mi esposo...ahora que ve estos problemas dice que cuando mi hijo llegue a ese grado que lo va a mandar a México o me voy con él.

Estamos muy frustrados y muy tristes. A mi esposo eso le enferma. Pero creemos que por lo menos si se va a trabajar en vez de ir a la escuela, estará lejos de esos muchachos malos. Yo sé que son "gangeros."

Ahora este director este año se les puso muy duro, que si faltaban más de una semana iban a reponer el curso ...

Pero fíjate no te llegó aquí ese papel de la escuela que dice las leyes que si ahora los niños faltan más de no sé cuántos días te van a mandar a corte?...es un ley del estado...hay que traer comprobante de por qué faltaron los niños, y si tú no avisas a la escuela, te van a mandar a corte.