HOW LATINA IMMIGRANT MOTHERS ENACT AGENCY
AND EXTEND LEARNING THROUGH FAMILY LITERACY

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Using data from a qualitative study, this paper examines how Latina immigrant women’s participation in a US family literacy program and the prevalent literacy and mothering discourses they encountered there shaped their enactments of agency. The findings demonstrate how participants used literacy, language, and parenting knowledge to create bridges of learning and success between home and children’s schools, between their children’s and their own learning, and between themselves and community members. This study elucidates how family literacy can extend program benefits beyond those who are enrolled.

Family literacy programs are designed to assist hard-to-reach parents such as immigrant women to navigate school systems and support schooled literacy, typically in ways that reflect middle-class academic values and behaviors (Auerbach, 1995; Gadsen, 1996). Although this perspective can be interpreted as colonizing (Reyes & Torres, 2007), family literacy can also offer beneficial educational and psychosocial outcomes. This paper reveals how such benefits increased participants’ voice and status and fostered learning and interactions between families, community members, and school personnel.

This study used a post-structural feminist framework and a narrative inquiry methodology. Primary data sources were 24 life history interviews with 5 Mexican immigrant mothers in a family literacy program. Secondary sources included observations of classes and program events, staff interviews, video diaries, document analysis, and a researcher journal. The research questions explored how the women enacted agency, how they used and disrupted prevalent discourses, and how program participation assisted women in doing so.

The findings revealed that by putting mainstream parenting and literacy skills to use, participants gained self-esteem, a sense of self-efficacy, a larger role in the family, and recognition from others. For example, modeling schooled literacy and demonstrating the ability to raise academically successful children garnered approval from staff, other students, husbands, and extended family members. Children and husbands recognized and sought the mother’s school knowledge. These factors helped women expand their power in the home. However, husbands and community members also criticized them when their behaviors challenged established power structures or social relations in the home, extended family, or community.

This study suggests that family literacy programs through program participants can support community awareness of school engagement and literacy practices. Programs should also examine the cultural nature of literacy and parenting practices. Researchers could build on these findings by studying how women’s agency influences family and community members.
Keywords:
Family literacy, Immigrant, Adult education, Agency, Gender, Mothering

References:


Gadsden, V. (1996). Designing and conducting family literacy programs that account for racial, ethnic, religious, and other cultural differences. *Family Literacy: Directions in research and implications for practice.*