

FEATURE ARTICLES: THEORY, RESEARCH,
POLICY, AND PRACTICE

“Mexican Americans Don’t Value
Education!”—On the Basis of the Myth,
Mythmaking, and Debunking

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Notwithstanding evidence to the contrary, a major myth lingers that Mexican Americans, particularly parents of low-socioeconomic status background, do not value education. As a consequence, the myth asserts, Mexican American children experience poor academic achievement. We examine this myth in 3 ways. First, we suggest that the basis for the myth lies in the pseudoscientific notion of “deficit thinking,” a mind-set molded by the fusion of ideology and science that blames the victim, rather than holding oppressive and inequitable schooling arrangements culpable. Second, we explore the course of the mythmaking itself. In doing so, we examine several sources (e.g., early master’s theses; published scholarly literature, particularly from the “cultural deprivation” and “at risk” child categories). Third, we provide discourse on how the myth can be debunked. This is done by providing strong evidence that Mexican Americans do indeed value education. Our evidentiary forms are (a) the Mexican American people’s long-standing struggle for equal educational opportunity, (b) the scholarly literature documenting parental involvement, and (c) a case study of transgenerational parental involvement.

Key words: Mexican Americans, education, value, mythmaking, debunking

Economist Thomas Sowell wrote the following in his chapter on “The Mexicans” (*Ethnic America: A History*, 1981): “*The goals and values of Mexican Americans have never centered on education*” [italics added] (p. 266). Historically and contemporarily, there have been numerous assertions by individuals in the scholarly literature and in media outlets that Mexican American parents, particularly of low-socioeconomic status (SES) background, do not value education. Thus, they fail to inculcate this value in their children via academic socialization, and seldom participate in parental involvement activities in their home or the school.¹ As a consequence, the myth contends, Mexican American children tend to perform poorly in school (e.g., low academic achievement). These allegations cannot be taken lightly, as there is substantial evidence that, in general, “when parents are involved in their youths’ schooling, children do better in school” (Marburger, 1990, p. 82).²

Our intent in this article is to

1. Shed some light on the fundamental basis of the myth that Mexican Americans do not value education.
2. Advance an understanding of the myth by identifying the sources of this false, unsupported assertion—the mythmakers themselves.
3. Debunk the myth by discussing literature that has demonstrated Mexican Americans do indeed value education.
4. Present a case study of Mexican American parental involvement in education (i.e., a transgenerational analysis of 6 families in Austin, Texas).

¹This note is excerpted, with minor modifications, from Valencia and Solórzano (1997, p. 192). Mexican Americans have not been alone in being pegged as not valuing education. During the 1960s, when familial forms of deficit thinking were widespread in the literature, the target populations were the all too familiar “culturally disadvantaged,” that is, “...Whites, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and all others of the poverty group who basically share a common design for living” (Marans & Lourie, 1967, p. 20). The carriers of the deficit were frequently identified as inadequate mothers and fathers who “...seem to perpetuate their own conditions in their children through their child-rearing patterns ... [and who] ...produce a disproportionate incidence of academic failures and of lower socioeconomic memberships among their full-grown offspring” (Marans & Lourie, 1967, p. 21). Implied in these assertions was that these parents did not value education (nor work, economic progress, and mobility).

²Numerous studies have documented the positive association between parental involvement and children’s academic performance (e.g., Chavin & Williams, 1988; Comer, 1986; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Moreno & López, 1999). Regarding the long-standing importance of parental involvement in children’s schooling performance, Rosado and Aaron (1991) comment,

Since the beginning of the American education system, parental involvement has played an important role in education (Cremin, 1977). This involvement has continued through the years, but in the last decade (1980s), it has gained momentum. Following the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, parental involvement became a key issue in education. (p. 24)

THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS OF THE MYTH

We contend that the basis of the myth—Mexican Americans don't value education—lies in the pseudoscientific notion of “deficit thinking” (see Valencia, 1997a, for a comprehensive discussion of the evolution of deficit thinking in educational thought and practice from the American Colonial period to the contemporary period). Deficit thinking refers to the idea that students, particularly of low-SES background and of color, fail in school because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process. The theory of deficit thinking has its roots in the racial climate of the American Colonial period (Menchaca, 1997), and has evolved as a protean model. Depending on the zeitgeist of the time period, the variants of deficit thinking have included genetic (Valencia, 1997b), cultural (Foley, 1997), familial (Pearl, 1997), and genetic-cultural-familial explanations (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Deficit thinking, an endogenous theory of school failure, “blames the victim” rather than examining how schools and the political economy are structured to prevent students from learning optimally. As such, the theory asserts that poor schooling performance of students of color is rooted in the students' (alleged) cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held blameless (Valencia, 1997a). The basis for the myth that Mexican Americans do not value education stems from the general model of deficit thinking, and from the specific variant of familial deficits. The argument goes as follows: Given that Mexican Americans (allegedly) do not hold education high in their value hierarchy, this leads to inadequate familial socialization for academic competence, which in turn contributes to the school failure of Mexican American children and youths.

Furthermore, the myth of Mexican Americans' indifference to the value of education can be more fully understood when viewed as part of a historical tradition of deficit thinking. In this tradition, Mexican Americans are described under the “Mexican American cultural model (stereotype)” in which their value orientations are presented as the root cause of their social problems (Hernández, 1970), including school failure (for overviews and critiques of the model, see, e.g., Menchaca, 2000; Romano-V, 1968). In a broader sense, the Mexican American stereotype model is grounded in the long-standing myth that behavior is equated with values (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). As Allen (1970) has noted,

Behavior cannot be equated with values. In other words, simply because a person behaves in a certain way does not mean he desires to do so because of his beliefs or values. Another problem is that the concept is tautological: Values inferred from behavior are used to explain behavior. To be useful for explaining behavior, values should be measured independent of the behavior to be explained, or no advantage can be claimed for the gratuitous labeling of the behavior. (pp. 372–373)

MYTHMAKING

The assertion that Mexican Americans are indifferent toward and devalue education has been communicated in various ways. These expressions are particularly seen in (a) some very early master's theses (1920s, 1930s), (b) published scholarly literature, and (c) opinions voiced in media outlets. In this section, we discuss examples of this mythmaking from these three categories.

Early Master's Theses

Taylor (1927) sought to investigate the possible reasons for "pedagogical retardation" (being overage for grade level) among young school-age Mexican American children in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The author concluded that mental retardation, lack of knowledge in English, excessive school transfers, and poor nutrition were contributing factors to pedagogical retardation among a substantial percentage of the students. Taylor also honed in on the "indifference of [the] family toward [the] value of education" (p. 173). Specifically contextualizing such "indifference" in school attendance issues, Taylor commented,

Every possible effort is made in Albuquerque toward the enforcement of regular attendance, insofar as the administrative officers are concerned. The difficulty lies in the home. A serious lack of the realization of the importance of regular attendance is the source of the trouble in these schools. The large percentage of illiterate parents, found especially among the Mexican population, *fails to understand the full value of the opportunity offered by the public schools* [italics added]. (pp. 176-177)

Other examples of these mythmakers of the past are

1. Gould (1932, southern California area study): "*As a general rule, the [Mexican] parents lack any desire for education*" [italics added] (p. 2).
2. Lyon (1933, Los Angeles City School District study): "The greatest cause of [intercultural] conflict arises from the attitude toward education on the part of the parents and ... Mexican girls. *The parents feel that the child is needed in the home and do not understand the necessity for education*" [italics added] (pp. 42-43).

The assertions by Taylor (1927), Gould (1932), and Lyon (1933) were not uncommon voices from the past regarding the establishment and perpetuation of the myth that Mexican Americans do not value education. Such contentions were based on deficit thinking and stereotypes. These newly credentialed individuals with their master's degrees failed to acknowledge the forces and conditions that

likely created obstacles for Mexican American parents to fully express their appreciation for and value of education—for example, not being welcome at schools because of racial animus, language barriers, and the need for their children to contribute economically to the household due to exploitative arrangements the parents faced in the world of work. This non-deficit thinking perspective can be seen, however, in a small number of master's theses from this period. Pratt (1938) investigated schooling conditions, SES background, and academic achievement of Mexican American and White children in Delta, Colorado (an agricultural community in which most of the Mexican Americans worked in the local sugar beet industry, and supplemented their income by harvesting other crops). Pratt found that the reasons (provided by the parents) for the Mexican American children's attendance problems were "no shoes to wear, no clothes to wear, too sick, had to work [most frequent response], and girls kept at home so they would not run around with the boys" (p. 96). Rather than blaming the victim, Pratt interpreted the children's poor attendance—which could have been viewed under a deficit thinking framework as parental indifference to education—to be related to serious economic problems: "It would seem that many of the deplorable circumstances of these impoverished people would and could be alleviated if the wage scale of the Mexican were raised to a higher level" (p. 102).

Scholarly Literature

To be sure, master's theses are considered as scholarly literature. Here, however, the focus is on literature (e.g., books, book chapters in edited volumes, journal articles) that, we assume, has gone through the rigors of peer review. We examine examples of mythmaking from three categories of scholarly literature: (a) the "culturally deprived" child literature of the 1960s, (b) the "at risk" child and family literature of the 1980s and 1990s, and (c) an "other" category.

"Cultural deprivation" literature. In the 1960s, the "culturally deprived" child (also referred to as the "culturally disadvantaged," "intellectually deprived," and "socially disadvantaged" child) was socially constructed (see Pearl, 1997, for a sustained coverage of this era). Voluminous literature spoke to the culturally deprived child and his or her (allegedly) socially pathological family and impoverished home environment (e.g., Frost & Hawkes, 1966; Hellmuth, 1967). As we previously discussed (see Footnote 1), Mexican American children and their families (particularly of low SES background) were, among other racial and ethnic groups, a targeted population of the 1960s mythmakers (see Marans & Lourie, 1967). Havighurst (1966), in a chapter titled "Who are the Socially Disadvantaged?" (a discussion on the general socially disadvantaged population), presented a brief list

of “family characteristics” the socially disadvantaged child lacks, compared to “modern urban” families (meaning middle class). The characteristic most germane to our discussion is that “the socially disadvantaged child lacks ... *Two parents who: read a good deal; read to him; show him that they believe in the value of education* [italics added]; reward him for good school achievement” (p. 18). Another example of mythmaking during the era of cultural deprivation is seen in Dougherty (1966), who—without the support of a single citation—commented, “*Parental indifference to the value of education is transmitted to the children* [italics added], where school careers are naturally characterized by poor attention, low achievement, and early leaving. Thus, the cycle of hopelessness and despair is repeated from generation to generation” (p. 389).

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss critiques of the cultural deprivation literature. We refer the interested reader to the writings of Baratz and Baratz (1970), Labov (1970), Pearl (1997), and Valencia and Solórzano (1997). Critiques of the cultural deprivation literature model have centered, for example, on the framework’s racist and classist nature, theoretical weaknesses, and methodological shortcomings of this body of research.

*The “At Risk” child literature.*³ First popularized in the educational policy circles of the early 1980s, the label *at risk* is now entrenched in the educational literature as well as in the talk of educators and policymakers (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Writing in 1995, Swadener and Lubeck (1995a) reported that since 1989 over 2,500 articles and conference papers have dealt with the at risk construct. Given their overrepresentation among the poor and low-SES families, Mexican Americans and other Latinos are considered by scholars of the at risk literature to be part of this group. Sleeter (1995) has asserted that the new term *at risk* is a resurrected metaphor for the cultural deprivation and culturally disadvantaged terms used with great frequency in the 1960s (also, see Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Although some of the literature on at risk students and their families alludes to unfavorable schooling conditions (e.g., low expectations of students, curriculum differentiation) and societal conditions (e.g., racism, lack of opportunity) that likely place students at risk for school failure, the *primary focus* is on *familial* characteristics (e.g., race or ethnicity, poverty, single parenthood) and *personal* characteristics of students (e.g., poor self-concept, self-destructive behaviors, English as second language, juvenile delinquency; see, e.g., Manning & Baruth, 1995; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 1997).

Regarding the role of the home and parents, “the ‘at risk’ label alleges that a child suffers some environmentally induced deficiency ... [and] by implication or

³Parts of this section are excerpted, with minor modifications, from Valencia and Solórzano (1997, pp. 196–197).

design, mothers are presumed to be the *source* of the problems children experience" (Lubeck, 1995, p. 54). Furthermore, "If a child does not fare well, emotionally, socially, or academically, it is the family—but the mother specifically—who is implicated" (Lubeck, p. 54). Lubeck (1995) pointed to a statewide (North Carolina) survey of principals and superintendents, in which the respondents associated at risk status with maternal employment, poverty, single parenting, and minority status. Administrators made reference to the roots of these problems mainly through innuendo:

We have large numbers of children who come from homes with no emphasis on education [italics added] . . . Large numbers of youngsters come into school with absolutely no background, either academic or social . . . Many of our five-year-olds come to kindergarten with minimal experiences and marginal skills partially due to poor parenting skills. Many parents are "drop-outs" and lack the know-how and ability to provide quality preschool experiences for their child [sic]. . . . Many of our homes do not offer children the support needed to develop emotionally, socially, and academically. (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, pp. 336–337)

In sum, a strong case can be made that the notion of at risk denotes a form of deficit thinking (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; also, see Fine, 1995; Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989). Part of the problem with the concept of at risk is that it tends to overlook any strengths and promise of the student so labeled, while drawing attention to the presumed shortcomings of the individual (Ronda & Valencia, 1994; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995b). Students continue to be defined as at risk based on "personal and familial characteristics" (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993, p. 9). As such, at risk has become a person-centered explanation of school failure. The construct of at risk is preoccupied with describing "deficiencies" in students, particularly alleged shortcomings rooted in familial and economic backgrounds of students. Finally, the concept of at risk qualifies to be under the rubric of deficit thinking in that the notion pays little, if any, attention to how schools are institutionally implicated in ways that exclude students from learning (see Valencia, in press). The idea of at risk blames the victim, as does the notion of deficit thinking. The deficit model turns students into burdens and trades potential for risk.

Other literature. Another category of scholarly literature in which mythmaking can be seen regarding the alleged indifference Mexican Americans have toward education is what we refer to as "other" literature. This category contains literature that does not snugly fit into either the cultural deprivation or at risk camps, although such scholarship shares the common feature of being heavily shaped by deficit thinking. Here we briefly discuss two examples of this other literature: Sowell (1981) and Dunn (1987).

This article opened with a quote by Sowell (1981) that is worth repeating: “*The goals and values of Mexican Americans have never centered on education*” [italics added] (p. 266). How does Sowell, who has written a history of racial and ethnic groups in the United States, support this sweeping generalization? What specific evidence does he marshal to defend such a blatant assertion? He does so by noting comparative high school completion rates across race and ethnicity: “As of 1960, only 13% of Hispanics in the Southwest completed high school, compared to only 17 percent for blacks in the same region, 28% among non-Hispanic Whites, and 39 percent among Japanese Americans” (p. 266). It appears that Sowell is making this argument: *Because Mexican Americans have the lowest high school completion rate of the groups he compares,⁴ then this means that Mexican Americans do not value education.* Clearly, Sowell frames his interpretation of the racial and ethnic high school completion gap in a deficit thinking manner. Explicit in his argument is that Mexican Americans are the makers of their own educational shortcomings. Furthermore, he fails to discuss the far different interpretations of the achievement gap proffered by the authors who presented the original data Sowell describes above (Grebler, Moore, & Guzmán, 1970, p. 143, Table 7-1). Grebler et al. attribute the achievement gap, in part, to intragroup (i.e., Anglo and Mexican American) variations in “rural-urban background, to immigrant status, and to poverty and other aspects of the home environment” (p. 170). Grebler et al. also present a structural inequality hypothesis to explain the gap:

The extreme disparities in different locales suggests [sic] also an [sic] hypothesis concerning a strategic determinant in a larger society: the extent to which local social systems and, through these, the school systems have held the Mexican American population in a subordinate position. (p. 170)⁵

Sowell’s (1981) claim that Mexican Americans’ goals and values have never focused on education is one of the most egregious and unfounded statements ever made about Mexican Americans and their schooling. His assertion is not only wrong (as we shall see later when we debunk the myth), but it is presented in a book on the history of racial and ethnic groups in the United States—a type of source that should be committed to the highest level of interpretive scholarship, not mythmaking.

⁴Actually, it was American Indians who had the lowest high school completion rate (11.4%), not Mexican Americans (see Grebler et al., 1970, p. 143, Table 7-1).

⁵It appears that Carter’s (1970) book, *Mexican Americans in Schools: A History of Educational Neglect*, was influential in shaping this structural inequality hypothesis offered by Grebler et al., who based their section “General School Practices Affecting Mexican Americans” (pp. 155–159) on Carter’s book. This was not mentioned by Sowell (1981).

A second example of mythmaking from the scholarly literature regarding the allegation that Mexican Americans do not value education is seen in Lloyd M. Dunn's (1987) research monograph, *Bilingual Hispanic Children on the U.S. Mainland: A Review of Research on Their Cognitive, Linguistic, and Scholastic Development*.⁶ While acknowledging that the schools have, in part, been implicated in not serving Latino pupils (i.e., Mexican American and Puerto Rican), Dunn places the blame on parents who, he contends, do not care about education. This is a major factor, Dunn argues, that explains why Latinos, as a group, have academic problems in schools.⁷ He opines, "it would be more correct to point out that these Hispanic pupils and their parents have also failed the schools and society, because *they have not been motivated and dedicated enough to make the system work for them*" [italics added] (p. 78). Furthermore, in the absence of any supportive data or sources, Dunn asserts, "*It [valuing education] is a tradition that Hispanics in general do not appear to have*" [italics added] (p. 80). Once again, we see a scholar evoke a long-standing deficit thinking tactic of shifting culpability away from structural problems in the schools (such as segregation, financial inequalities, and curriculum differentiation), to the backs and shoulders of Latino parents who are expected to carry the near exclusive burden of school success for their children. Moreover, Dunn is either unaware of or chooses to disregard the available literature that Latinos do value and do get involved in their children's education, an area we discuss shortly.

Media Expressions

A third way in which the myth of Mexican Americans' indifference to the importance of education has been expressed is through individuals making such pronouncements in some forum that subsequently capture the attention of the media (particularly newspapers and television). We discuss two cases in point: Lauro Cavazos and Lino Graglia.

Lauro Cavazos, former United States Secretary of Education (and the top-ranking Latino) in President George H. Bush's administration, made some comments in early April 1990 that set off a maelstrom of disputation. Cavazos made his comments at a press conference in San Antonio that was concerned with the first of a series of five regional hearings on Hispanic educational problems. He stated, "*Hispanics have always valued education... but somewhere along the line we've lost*

⁶This section on Dunn is excerpted, with minor modifications, from Valencia & Solórzano (1997, pp. 190–191).

⁷In his monograph, Dunn's (1987) comments on Latino parents' indifference to the importance of education were indeed controversial. The most disputatious section of his monograph, however, was his position that there was a "probability that inherited genetic material is a contributing factor" (p. 63) to the low scores of Mexican American and Puerto Rican children on measures of intelligence. For discussion and critique of Dunn's genetic interpretation, see Valencia and Solórzano (1997) and Valencia and Suzuki (2001).

that. *I really believe that, today, there is not that emphasis*" [italics added] (Snider, 1990, p. 1). There was immediate response from the media. The headlines of the *San Antonio Light* pronounced, "Cavazos Says Attitude Hurts Hispanics" (Snider, 1990, p. 1). The *New York Times*' headline of a front-page story proclaimed, "Education Secretary Criticizes the Values of Hispanic Parents" (Snider, 1990, p. 1).

Suffice it to say, Cavazos's pronouncements provoked considerable public clamor, particularly from Mexican American San Antonians. Dr. José A. Cárdenas, Executive Director of the Intercultural Development Research Association and lifelong educational activist commented, "It's [Cavazos's assertion] a simple case of the victim being blamed for the crime" (Snider, 1990, p. 1). James A. Vásquez, Superintendent for the San Antonio Edgewood Independent School, responded, "The terrible thing is ... that he's denying what's happened to Mexican Americans in the history of this state, how we've been discriminated against in every way. It proves he continues to be very far removed from the community" (Snider, 1990, p. 2). Vásquez's contention of a history of widespread discrimination, including educational inequalities in Texas, can be amply documented by existing scholarship (see De León, 1983; Feagin & Booher Feagin, 1999; San Miguel, 1987; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Valencia, 2000).

Cavazos's unfounded and insulting statements about Hispanics' attitude toward education certainly provoked outcries. This resultant uproar paled, however, in comparison to the commotion generated by similar comments that constitutional law Professor Lino Graglia made at a news conference on September 10, 1997, at The University of Texas at Austin. At that time, Graglia was chosen as honorary co-chairman of the newly established group, Students for Equal Opportunity—a group who was "tired of hearing only from supporters of affirmative action" (Roser, 1997, p. B1). At the campus press conference, where the new student group made its debut, Graglia made the following remarks regarding affirmative action, race, and academic performance at The University of Texas School of Law:

The central problem is that Blacks and Mexican Americans are not academically competitive [with Whites]... Various studies seem to show that Blacks [and] Mexican Americans spend less time in school. *They have a culture that seems not to encourage achievement* [italics added]... failure is not looked upon with disgrace.⁸

In an NBC *Today* interview with reporter Matt Lauer on September 12, 1997, Graglia was asked if he had any statistical backing for his cultural statements about minority students and educational achievement:

Graglia: I'm not an expert on educational matters.

⁸This quote by Graglia is taken from a newsclip (of the September 10, 1997 news conference at UT) shown on NBC *Today*, September 12, 1997 (Lauer, 1997).

Lauer: But you do agree with the statement that came out of yours that says they [Blacks and Mexican Americans] have a culture that seems not to encourage achievement?

Graglia: Well, I meant to say that there are some cultures, like some of the Asian cultures that insist more highly on the students going to school and achieving in school...

Ramiro Canales (a member of the Chicano/Hispanic Law Students Association at UT) was also interviewed by Lauer, who asked Canales how he felt about the cultural issues Graglia raised.

Canales: Professor Graglia is not qualified to make cultural assessments. He is a law school professor and not a cultural anthropologist, and when he makes these generalizations they not only promote racial stereotypes but also distort reality as it is in Texas. I think both African American and Mexican American cultures promote success. I think that the parents of all the minority law students want their students [*sic*] to succeed.

The nefarious pronouncements from Graglia, who has a long history of speaking out against affirmative action and using busing for school desegregation (Roser & Tanamachi, 1997), drew national and international media coverage and swift denunciations.⁹ Included among the public condemnors were UT School of Law Dean Michael Sharlot, UT Interim President Peter Flawn, UT System Chancellor William Cunningham, student organizations, professors, civil rights organizations, and racial and ethnic minority lawmakers (Martin, 1997; Roser & Tanamachi, 1997). Regarding the latter group, Hispanic state lawmakers called for Graglia's resignation. Senator Gregory Luna, head of the State Hispanic Caucus, stated, "It seems we're in an era where the Ku Klux Klan does not come in white robes but in the robes of academe" (Martin, 1997, p. 1). UT students of color were also very involved in the protest against Graglia. They staged a sit-in at the School of Law, and helped organize a political rally in which Reverend Jesse Jackson, in front of 5,000 people, lambasted Graglia (Roser & Tanamachi, 1997).

The Cavazos and Graglia incidents serve as reminders that statements made about racial or ethnic groups—in which the remarks are shaped by deficit thinking, ahistoricism, ignorance of scholarly literature, and bigotry—have no value in promoting further understanding of the achievement gap between White and minority

⁹It appears that Graglia's views on affirmative action have hurt him. According to Martin, reporter of the *UT Daily Texan*, "former President Ronald Reagan [in 1986] pulled away from appointing Graglia to the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals after complaints about his remarks regarding affirmative action" (1997, p. 2).

student groups. These incidents also should remind us that we need to be vigilant in responding to unfounded comments about Mexican Americans and other people of color.

In conclusion, it is quite evident that the myth of Mexican Americans not valuing education has evolved into a stereotype of epic proportions. Apparently having its roots in the 1920s master's theses, it has flourished as it has been promulgated in the scholarly literature of the culture of poverty, culturally deprived, and at risk child, in texts on racial and ethnic history and cross-cultural cognitive and academic achievement assessments, and statements by individuals that are deemed newsworthy by the media. There is no doubt that many Mexican American school-age children and youths experience, on the average, school failure. Valencia (in press) discusses 15 different schooling conditions and outcomes that help to understand the nature of such school failure. To attribute the persistent and pervasive achievement gap between Mexican American students and their White peers to a value orientation of Mexican American indifference to the importance of education is baseless, irresponsible, and racist. Furthermore, and very importantly, this assertion of not valuing education is a *myth*. Next, we bring forth evidence to demonstrate how this myth can be exposed.

DEBUNKING THE MYTH

The indiscriminate comments that we have reviewed by a number of individuals who contend that Mexican Americans have never had education as a goal, nor valued it, is far from the truth. For example, had Sowell (1981) carefully done his historical research he would have found that Mexican Americans have rallied around education for many decades (see, e.g., San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). In this section, we debunk the myth of Mexican American indifference to the importance of education by providing three evidentiary forms: (a) the historical and contemporary struggle for equal educational opportunity, (b) the scholarly literature documenting parental involvement, and (c) a case study of transgenerational parental involvement.

Historical and Contemporary Struggle For Equal Educational Opportunity

The history and contemporary endeavors of the Mexican American community's quest for equal educational opportunity has been so extensive and rich that the first author (R. R. Valencia) is able to teach an undergraduate course, "Chicano Educational Struggles," at The University of Texas at Austin on this topic. The course is an analysis of how Mexican Americans have struggled for better education via five historical and contemporary processes. In brief, they are

1. Litigation. Since the 1930s, Mexican Americans have brought forth lawsuits of various types in their efforts to improve the educational lot of their children and youths. Such litigation has involved, for example, *segregation* (for a discussion of key cases see San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Valencia, Menchaca, & Donato, in press), *special education* (Henderson & Valencia, 1985), *school financing* (Valencia, in press), *school closures* (Valencia, 1980, 1984a, 1984b), *undocumented children* (Cárdenas & Cortez, 1986), and *high-stakes testing* (Valencia & Bernal, 2000).¹⁰ Notwithstanding the range of outcomes of this litigation as a whole (bittersweet ones, some losses, and some victories), taking their cases to court for over the last 70 years speaks to the reality that Mexican Americans highly value education.

2. Advocacy Organizations. In their pursuit of improved education for their community, Mexican American parents, scholars, lawyers, and youths have founded a number of advocacy organizations. Beginning with the establishment of the League of United Latin American Citizens in 1929 (LULAC; Márquez, 1993), many advocacy groups, in which better education is a rallying point for action, have been founded over the years. Examples of these highly visible organizations are the American GI Forum (Ramos, 1998), Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF; O'Connor & Epstein, 1984), and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA; Muñoz, 1989). These advocacy organizations, and many others, have played critical roles in the identification of issues and in the advancement of improved educational conditions and outcomes for Mexican American students. For example, San Miguel and Valencia (1998) note, "Over the last three decades, MALDEF has evolved into a chief source of successful education litigation for the Mexican American community, winning many lawsuits and setting highly influential case law" (p. 388).

3. Individual Activists. Another indication that Mexican Americans value education stems from the work of scores of individuals who have championed the cause, that is, the Mexican American community's historical and contemporary resolve for the pursuit and attainment of educational equality. Historically, there have been, for example, the likes of grassroots organizer Eleuterio Escobar in San Antonio, Texas, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (García, 1979); Héctor García, founder of the American GI Forum in Texas in 1948 (Ramos, 1998); George I. Sánchez, scholar and civil rights activist from the 1930s to 1970s (Romo, 1986); Pete Tijerina, founder of MALDEF in San Antonio, Texas, in 1968 (O'Connor & Epstein, 1984); and Mari-Luci Jaramillo, pioneer of bilingual and bicultural education in New Mexico (Vásquez, 1994). To this illustrious list, we can add numerous other individual activists: university professors, lawyers, students, parents, community organizers, schoolteachers, politicians, and so forth.

¹⁰For citations of legal cases germane to most of these various categories of litigation noted here, see San Miguel and Valencia (1998).

4. Political Demonstrations. For decades, Mexican Americans have expressed their collective interest and action in promoting better education for children and youths by engaging in public confrontations in a display of dissatisfaction with oppression, with the goal of gaining resources. One of the more common forms of political demonstrations has been the strategy of a "blowout" (school walkout). It appears that the first such blowout occurred in 1910 in San Angelo, Texas, lasting through 1915 (De León, 1974). At the heart of the blowout was the Tejano community's demand that its children be allowed to attend the superior White schools. Other well-known blowouts transpired in East Los Angeles in 1968 (Rosen, 1974), and in Crystal City, Texas, in 1969 (Navarro, 1995).

5. Legislation. A final form of struggle in which Mexican Americans have expressed their resolve in improving the educational lot for their children and youths is seen in legislative efforts. One example is the long struggle for bilingual education in Texas in which State Senator Joe Bernal and State Representative Carlos Truan persevered from 1969 to 1981 to institutionalize bilingual education (San Miguel, 1987; Vega, 1983). Another example is the "Top Ten Percent Plan," a law that went into effect in Texas in Fall 1998. The bill, written by State Representative Irma Rangel and State Senator Gonzalo Barrientos, allows high school students who graduate in the top 10% of their graduating classes to be automatically admitted to any public 4-year institution of higher education in Texas, including its premier institutions (see Chapa, 1997).

Parental Involvement Literature

Studies of Mexican American parental involvement in education over the past 10 years present a more nuanced and sympathetic view than in earlier decades. Recent ethnographic studies give powerful testimony to the cultural strengths and assets of Latino families (for a review of seven studies, see Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; also see Villenas & Foley, in press). For example, Romo and Falbo (1996) conducted a 4-year longitudinal study of 100 Latino students (overwhelmingly Mexican Americans) deemed at risk by their school districts. The commitment of the students' families to education surfaced time after time through *consejos* (advice-giving narratives). While many other factors also affect educational outcomes, it is wrong to say that Mexican American parents don't care. Similarly Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) found in their study of 189 Latino adolescents that immigrant parents had a fierce desire for their children to achieve academically.

Many studies have identified effective parental teaching strategies initiated by both Mexican American parents and schools (Hernández, 1995; Lesar, Espinosa, & Diaz, 1997; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Moreno, 1997, 2000; Morrow & Young, 1997; Nistler & Maiers, 1999; Rodríguez-Brown, Li, & Albom, 1999). Likewise, "funds of knowledge" about the work-a-day world within Mexican American families (topics of which may differ from other racial and ethnic groups)

are also being recognized as important educational resources often overlooked in the past (González et al., 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

Furthermore, the myth of lack of concern about education is effectively disassembled by literature documenting the high expectations for children's education and positive beliefs held by Mexican American families. Numerous studies have identified high expectations for children's academic achievement and a multitude of supportive behaviors in Mexican American homes that counter the long-standing myth about Mexican American parents' disregard for education (see, e.g., Achor & Morales, 1990; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Delgado-Gaitán & Trueba, 1991; Gándara, 1982; Laosa, 1978; Moll et al., 1992; Moreno & López, 1999; Moreno & Valencia, in press).

In-depth interviews with Mexican American mothers by Lara-Alecio, Irby, and Ebener (1997) demonstrate three categories of Mexican American parental behaviors that support high achievement by low-income students. These include (a) high expectations, (b) belief in education, and (c) parents as links between home and school. Setting high expectations for the completion of school and expressing the desire for children to further their education, or become more educated than the parents, appear to be powerful and pervasive beliefs and attitudes among Mexican American families.

In an examination of data concerning 1,714 eighth-grade Mexican American students from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, Keith and Lichtman (1994) confirmed the importance of parental involvement and found that parents who set high educational goals for their children appeared to improve their children's academic success. Moreno and López (1999) studied a sample of 158 Latina mothers and found that even though less acculturated women reported less knowledge about school activities and more barriers to involvement, they nonetheless reported high educational expectations for their children.

Morrow and Young (1997) found that children and parents enjoyed working with each other on literacy tasks, and that even though low-SES families often found it difficult to shoulder more responsibility, they were sincerely interested in their children's educational welfare. Quantitative research by Okagaki and Frensch (1998) shows that Latino parents hold approximately the same ideals of children's academic attainment as Whites. In addition, both groups had similar expectations concerning college enrollment for their children. In *Great Expectations* (Immerwahr & Foleno, 2000), one of the most comprehensive national surveys of the public's attitudes and opinions regarding higher education ever conducted, the authors' results laid to rest the myth that minority parents don't value higher education as highly as Whites:

It is ... sometimes suggested that members of these minority groups [Hispanic and African American] compared to other populations, do not place as high a value on higher education. The findings from this study seem conclusively to eliminate this ...

reason. *Higher education is important for all Americans, but it is especially important to African American and Hispanic parents, who are significantly more likely to emphasize higher education than either White parents or the population as a whole.* [italics added] (p. 4)

Several studies report that *all* the families in their interview samples held high aspirations for their children's academic success (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Moll et al., 1992). "The common thread with all parents was that they cared about their children's education," according to Delgado-Gaitán (p. 495). The study by Moll et al. included 25 Mexican American families in Arizona and approximately 100 observations in the homes. Moll and his colleagues said, "[They—the families] have a very strong philosophy of childrearing that is supportive of education ... they have goals of a university education for their children ... all the households we visited possess similar values" (p. 137).

Transgenerational Parental Involvement: A Case Study

Mexican American parents are interested and involved in their children's education as demonstrated through school activities as well as behaviors strictly within the home. The internal home behaviors by Mexican Americans concerning school have been little studied, but are of critical importance to understanding parental attitudes towards the value of education (see Henderson, 1966; Henderson & Merritt, 1968; Laosa, 1978, 1980). While some parents cannot become *externally* involved with education at the school itself, the families in the present case study were all deeply involved *internally*, that is, within the home.

Interviews with 10 adults (4 grandparents and 6 parents) from 6 Mexican American families in Austin, Texas, illustrate both internal and external involvement in education (Black, 1996). All adults were bilingual or English-speaking and had resided in Texas from 2 to 5 generations. The economic histories of all 6 families consistently told of great difficulties and sacrifices by grandparents and others, culminating in stable, if modest employment in the parents' generation.

Parental interactions with school, such as attendance at meetings and volunteering for school activities, are examples of *external*, or public, involvement in education. As López et al. (2001) have pointed out, these are the types of behaviors most often mentioned in the parental involvement literature (also see Epstein, 1990). Further, these authors distinguish between school involvement on the part of the parents and home involvement on the part of the school (such as training parents in child literacy strategies). The present case study illustrates a more subtle type of parental involvement that is often difficult to capture: the attitudes and practices concerning school that are initiated by the family and found exclusively

in the home itself (Laosa & Henderson, 1991). Such actions as telling family stories about school experiences and making sure children arrive at school on time each day are examples of parents' involvement with school *internally*, that is, through private, family behaviors within the home (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Leichter, 1973).

1. **External Involvement With School.** Members of these families discussed their external involvement in education through service, teacher contacts, and school visits. Several members of these families played active roles in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) of their child's school. For example, one grandmother was a life member of the PTA, and one parent—who had been forced to drop out of high school when she became pregnant as a teenager—later served as PTA president of her child's school. Some parents initiated contact with teachers in other ways. "I never hesitated to call the teacher when [my daughter] needed it," commented another mother; "I even called one of them [in the] last six weeks to check on things." When the daughter was in elementary school, this mother admitted she called the teacher every Friday to find out about homework due on Monday. One father visits the school periodically, surprising his son occasionally for lunch in the cafeteria or visiting his classroom.

2. **Internal Involvement With School.** Many of the grandparents and parents had work obligations and transportation issues that prevented them from participating outside the home in the school life of their children. Members of all 6 families reported behaviors within the home, however, that demonstrate the value they place on schooling. Besides seemingly straightforward concerns like homework and school attendance, family conversations within the home reveal attitudes toward education that go a long way to explode the myth of lack of concern (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Romo & Falbo, 1996).

"We help our kids with homework around the kitchen table every night," said one father. "One child is accelerated, but the other one needs more help," he continued. "I always sit down with them to do homework," claimed another mother. She remembered her older siblings always helped her with homework as well. "The older ones were smarter, and they helped the younger ones," she said. "I couldn't help them," one grandmother with only 2 years of schooling explained, "but my husband always did." Within these 6 families, at least, homework is seen as important and steps are taken to make sure it gets done.

Another grandmother spoke of getting her children to school. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, her husband used to walk their seven children the three blocks from their house to school every morning and walk them back every afternoon. "He was lucky," she said, "because his boss would let him do that."

Some of the stories by the grandmothers in these families of their own school experiences clearly illustrate the high value they placed on education. One woman

started school at age 10 in a segregated school for Mexican-origin children in Texas. Being older than most first graders, the teacher asked her to help the younger ones. So, in essence, she became the teacher's aide. She finished the sixth grade at age 16. In those days, no opportunity for further schooling was available to her in that town, so her formal education ended. She was, however, immediately hired as the school caretaker. She swept the school, built the fire in the stove on cold days, and cooked soup for the children during the Depression. In later life she worked in her own children's elementary school cafeteria for 20 years. She became a life member of the PTA and volunteered many hours at the school after she retired. She was "at school" almost every working day of her life since age 10 in one way or another.

"I cried and cried for days when I had to quit school," recalled another Mexican American grandmother who had to quit school during the Depression, "I didn't want to quit, but it was a matter of some of us not having enough to eat if I didn't." She took a job as a maid, washing clothes on a scrub board for \$2.50 per week. "Reading was my favorite subject," she said, "I went to a spelling bee once on the radio ... but I didn't win. I loved going to school." Here was clearly a child who valued school, but was forced by extreme circumstances to end her formal education in order to help support her family.

Besides family stories that are often retold within the family group, other family conversation also reflects high value for education. "We talk to our kids about their ambitions," a father said, "'Anyone can flip a burger. You're not gonna do that. You're gonna need more education,' we say. We want them to be successful ... If you really want to make a difference, you've got to stay in school and go as far as you can," he added. One mother described her communication with her daughter as "always frank and open. We always talk about the consequences of our actions. I tell her 'my job is to feed you and clothe you; your job is to go to school and learn,'" she continued.

One grandmother told of scolding her daughter, who did not want to go to school one day. "Do you want to be like me," she asked, "and know nothing? The only job I could get is in the laundry or the kitchen. No money. Do you want that?" (see Romo & Falbo, 1996, for examples of similar cautions to children). The parents and grandparents in this case study explicitly connect, through *consejos*, academic success with college and later adult economic security. "Children need to go to college today in order to get good jobs," commented one mother. "Kids need a whole lot of education," another parent said. "The teachers are preparing them for college, saying 'you can do it.' [When I was in school] I don't think I ever heard the word college. I would like to see my son go to college and be the best he can be," she continued. Another mother summed up the reality: "The job market requires college now," she said, "It's important to get further education to get a good job. That's the only way to break the cycle [of poverty] that our parents and grandparents went through."

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it is important for scholars to be steadfast in debunking the myth that Mexican Americans don't value education. Although such debunking may be deemed reactive, it is necessary. In the production of scholarship dealing with Mexican Americans, we often have to deconstruct inaccurate and unsound writings before we can construct new works. Without acknowledging this reality, it is difficult to continue the ongoing proactive scholarship on the Mexican American family and its rich, varied, and positive expressions regarding the importance of the institution of education.

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