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# Latina Resilience in Higher Education: Contributing Factors Including Seasonal Farmworker Experiences

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and Veronica Gomez-Vilchis<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Many Latina students overcome multiple obstacles to earn university degrees. Five married Latina women with children and seasonal farmworker backgrounds are the focus of this study which is analyzed through resiliency theory to understand factors contributing to their academic resilience. Variables connected to academic success are explored and include supportive familial networks, self-efficacy, and participants' desires to instill the value of education in their children. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

## **Resumen**

Muchas estudiantes latinas resuelven obstáculos múltiples para obtener títulos universitarios. El foco de este estudio son cinco mujeres latinas casadas, con hijos y que se dedican a trabajo agrícola de temporada. Se usó la teoría de resistencia y se analizó la información para entender los factores contribuyentes al logro académico. Se exploraron variables conectadas con éxito académico que incluyen redes familiares de apoyo, auto-suficiencia, y deseos de las participantes de inculcar el valor de la educación en sus hijos. Se presentan implicaciones para investigación futura y práctica.

## **Keywords**

Latina students, seasonal farmworkers, higher education, resilience, support networks, academic success, achievement

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I tell them [her children] if you stay in school ( . . . ) then you will not have to go through what I am going through ( . . . ) So my BA is not necessarily for me, it's not mine, it's my family's, it's my kids, it's my grandkids, it's my husband's. It's a shared BA (Alicia, participant).

Latina students who face and overcome significant challenges while pursuing higher education degrees are valuable members of U.S. society whose stories of academic resilience should be recognized and respected. In this qualitative study, five Latina students' stories are analyzed through a resiliency model (Morales & Trotman, 2004) to better understand the factors leading to successful completion of a college degree. The importance of analyzing this population is because, even though Latinos are the largest minority group across college campuses nationwide, both Latinas and Latinos are highly underrepresented in higher education at every level (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Only 14% of Latina students in the United States have completed 4 years of college or more when compared to White (29.3%), Black (20.6%), and Asian and Pacific Islander (49.3%) females (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Because a paucity of literature exists that focuses on the added challenges migrant and seasonal farmworkers face when pursuing a higher education, participants' seasonal farmworker backgrounds are considered in this analysis as critical experiences that contributed to their academic resilience. Their experiences are described within the context of the challenges they confronted while attending a university center campus in Central Washington.

## Review of the Literature

### *Latinas in Higher Education: Support & Tensions*

Over the last few years, Latinas have been the focus of several studies that situate them as complex members of society who, by their participation in education, have the ability to impact positively their own trajectories as well as their families' and communities' (Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010; Durand, 2011; Espinoza, 2010). As roles and responsibilities within their families fluctuate, expand, and evolve many rely on the cooperation and interdependence of familial networks—both nuclear and extended—whose members support decisions connected to their education and the education of their children.

These networks either bolster or constrain Latinas' decisions to pursue higher education. Stereotypical depictions of “a good Latina woman” or “the good daughter” epitomize the expectation that she will always prioritize family needs above her own individual ones (Espinoza, 2010). These cultural perceptions when practiced may collide with Latinas' desires to go to college, complete higher education degrees, and seek fulfilling careers. Latinas often find themselves caught in a cultural bind between meeting the demands of their individualistic-oriented school culture and their collectivist-oriented family culture (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Many are pressured to fulfill multiple, and often competing obligations simultaneously which can be detrimental to achieving academic success or the completion of higher education degrees (Sy & Romero, 2008).

## *Latina Resilience*

Resiliency as an ideology that focuses on success and promotes critical consciousness is beneficial in analyzing life stories related to the struggles and challenges historically underserved populations face and overcome in U.S. schools and educational institutions (Campa, 2010; Morales, 2010). Academic resilience is a process, acquired over time, of overcoming obstacles and developing coping skills needed to succeed academically (Morales & Trotman, 2004). These coping skills include a student's ability to adapt to life's challenges while maintaining a strong internal locus of control (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Research focused on Latinas has demonstrated a number of variables contributing to school success in higher education including supportive familial and community networks, a strong sense of identity and self-efficacy, and equitable access to resources (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Cerezo & Chang, 2013). These variables are critical to why many Latina women and women of color have overcome significant barriers and have succeeded in school in spite of adversity, oppression, or other challenges which include low expectations from educators, negative school experiences, discrimination, and marginalization (Cavazos et al., 2010).

## *Seasonal Farmworkers*

Historically, migrant and seasonal farmworkers from Mexico and Central America have been young, single men with unauthorized status who have secured temporary employment in the agricultural industry (Escobar Latapí, Martin, Donato, & López, Castro, 1998). Whereas migrant farmworkers temporarily relocate to follow the crops, seasonal farmworkers maintain more permanent housing remaining employed principally in agriculture within a 24-month period (U.S. Code, 1962). However, for over the past 10 years, as U.S.–Mexico border enforcement has increased more women and children have immigrated to the United States to join their husbands and families. These families, especially those with members who are unauthorized, are choosing to remain in the United States instead of risking separation by returning to their home countries (Sellers Campbell, 2008). Consequently, as demographics change across the United States, many state, regional, and community agencies including schools, community colleges, and some universities are experiencing dramatic increases in Latino enrollment (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

All participants in this qualitative study come from seasonal farmworker backgrounds in Washington State (see Table 1). Three have directly worked in the fields and two have parents who were farmworkers. As with the majority of Latino immigrant workers who come from Mexico and Central America, the participants and/or their families

**Table 1.** Participant Background Information.

Participant	Place of birth	Status	Age	Seasonal farmworker background	College (degree in family)
Alicia	Mexico	married/mother	mid 40s	seasonal worker	1st to earn degree
Beatrice	Mexico	married/mother	early 20s	seasonal worker	1st to earn degree
Gaby	United States	married/mother	early 30s	parents-seasonal workers	1st to earn degree
Lupe	Mexico	married/mother	late 30s	seasonal worker	1st to earn degree in United States
Olivia	El Salvador	married/mother	mid 30s	parents-seasonal workers	1st to earn degree

are part of the 62.5% of all immigrant workers employed in farming, fishing, or forestry occupations in Washington state (Jayapal & Curry, 2009).

The participants in this study were nontraditional students with little to no history of higher education and who lacked the information needed to either begin or complete a college degree. These five Latina women had taken classes at an affiliated campus located 40 miles from the main university by one of the researchers who frequently taught courses at this site. They were selected through purposeful sampling and participated voluntarily. Although six students originally had been recruited, only five were able to participate in the focus-group interviews. All participants were enrolled in an Early Childhood Education Program through which, upon completion, they would earn a bachelor's degree.

### *Data Collection*

Two focus-group interviews were conducted at the university center where the participants were attending classes. Each was a session of 1 hr 30 min, the first of which four participants attended. The second interview was added as a means to capture the story of one participant who was unable to attend the first interview and to allow other participants the opportunity to elaborate on themes that had emerged from the previous focus group. Interview questions were semistructured and focused on the challenges, successes, and sacrifices the participants experienced living in the United States while pursuing a college degree. Both focus-group interviews were audio-recorded and videotaped with participant consent.

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were transcribed by two graduate assistants, one of whom is bilingual in Spanish and English. The authors reviewed the transcripts to ensure the text was consistent with the recordings. The authors then reviewed each interview independently using open-coding procedures to group similar items (i.e., a word, a sentence,

or multiple sentences) and to subscribe a category to each common link (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To organize the data in a systematic manner, the authors compared and contrasted categories by using NVIVO8 Software. As patterns among and between categories became apparent, the authors began to see emergent themes that allowed for deeper analysis from data collected in both interviews. The authors agreed that although family support was a key factor to most participants' academic resilience, the nature of family support and its manifestation were complex. Limitations to the study consisted of a low number of participants and only two data sources (focus-group interviews). A greater representation of participants' perspectives and individual interviews to follow-up on specific themes were recommended for future research as a means to add richer data to the overall study.

## **Findings**

For all five participants, several obstacles existed that threatened their completion of a bachelor's degree in education. Of all the challenges they described, language barriers were the most common. Surprising findings included that not all of the Latina participants felt directly supported by their families to pursue a college degree and that family support, when manifested, differed greatly among participants. Participants whose families discouraged their participation in higher education had to directly oppose family members' wishes, including their parents', in pursuit of a college education. Other participants who received encouragement from family members to go to college realized that their family's support often was limited by family members' inability to assist them with academic content and knowledge of the school system. Nonetheless, all participants demonstrated resilience by continuing with their college courses even though some of the challenges they faced originated within their own families.

For three participants, family support was demonstrated through financial or moral support to assist them with completion of their higher education degrees. However, for two of the participants family members openly discouraged them from attending college when energies could be spent more practically on making money to contribute to family needs. These participants' families, especially participants' parents, cared deeply for their overall welfare, but had difficulty understanding how furthering their education would improve family circumstances. For these parents, going to college meant situating the family as a secondary priority. A chasm developed between participants' desires to improve their family's socioeconomic status by attaining a college degree and their parents' expectations of the roles and responsibilities consistent with a "good" Latina mother. Additional findings indicated that participants drew strength from their farmworker backgrounds knowing challenges that arose during their academic programs paled in comparison to what they and/or their families had already experienced. Overall, participants were "toughened up" by life's circumstances and became even more determined to succeed academically.

## Family Support and Resilience

Family support differed among participants' experiences and often was manifested in moral support or generalized concern. Participants' academic resilience was tested as they attempted to balance the traditional roles of being a good Latina mother, wife, and daughter with going to college. Considering their families' needs did not curtail their own desires to go to college, receive a higher education degree, earn money, and be strong role models for their children. Two of the older participants who had worked in the fields were the first to go to college. Family members, they explained, questioned this departure from the norm. These family members, especially participants' parents, were concerned that the time, energy, and money spent on college would fracture the family unit as their daughters would need to focus on school as well as on the needs of their families. Nevertheless, both participants' academic resilience was strengthened by their determination to break from traditional roles expected of them. Alicia stated,

I come from a very large family (. . .) first generation, and none of them ever attended college. So the reason why I am doing it [attending college] is because my mom did not believe in a woman being out getting an education.

Lupe supported this statement explaining,

My parents didn't think highly of school. I am one of six and still (. . .) it was, "Why are you going to college if you are only going to work out in the fields (. . .) going to get married and have children?"

Other participants felt morally supported by their parents as they were growing up, but often lacked educational support. Participants' parents demonstrated moral support through ensuring their school clothes were clean and tidy, their lunchboxes packed with healthy food, and their manners toward others were respectful. Participants explained their parents' lack of educational support was demonstrated through their inability to help with content material "because they didn't go to school [and didn't] know how to help," or "didn't have time to participate (. . .) in school activities or functions because they were working so [hard]." While most of the participants' parents were not able to assist the participants with specifics on how to reach their educational goals they often offered other forms of support. Two of the participants' parents provided daycare to their grandchildren while these participants attended college classes.

Three of the five participants felt grateful for their parents' support and sacrifices. Several times, during the focus-group interviews, participants equated "support" with "sacrifice." If a parent provided support for a participant's schooling it usually meant a significant price was paid, usually in the form of time or money. Many participants felt the need to "do well" in school as a way of "repaying" their familial debts. One of the younger participants, Beatrice, offered, "And I think they are really proud of me, and I think they want to see me do good, and they supported me a lot, and I want to be somebody for them." Olivia described a time when her mother had to leave home for

3 years because of a job she had found in a different state. The participant understood her mother's actions as a necessary step in supporting her through school and in life, but expressed deep sadness about the separation:

I missed my mom for three years ( . . . ) and we all make sacrifices, the amount of stress that we go through for us immigrants or Hispanics or Latinas, Chicanas, you name it. It's a lot sometimes.

Finally, all participants expressed with great emotion the desire to be role models for their children and younger siblings. "Giving back" to their families also meant overcoming all academic challenges, remaining in school, and realizing educational goals. Olivia, a mother of three, was adamant that the completion of her BA instilled values of responsibility in her children whose only "job" was to "go to school." Beatrice wanted to "be an example" for her younger brothers by going to college and talking to them about college as a means of "pushing them ( . . . ) to finish at least high school." Gaby spoke of being a role model by doing homework with her kids: "We do homework together and it's not boring ( . . . ) And they think it's cool."

### *Farmworker Experience and Resilience*

Not unlike other Latinas who have immigrated to the United States to find good employment and to establish a stable and happy home, the participants in this study also aspired to "a high quality of life for themselves and their families despite legal, cultural and social barriers" (Sellers Campbell, 2008, p. 235). All five participants were from seasonal farmworker backgrounds and were proud of their affiliation with farmwork. They believed the sacrifice and struggle they had confronted made them strive harder in their academic careers. They were also quick to acknowledge their gratitude for the opportunities presented to them through education.

When asked about how being a daughter of immigrant, seasonal farmworkers impacted her education, Olivia responded "[it] pushed me to go to school and to get a good education and get a good job." She attributed her ability to go to school to her parents who "worked really hard ( . . . ) My mom especially wanted me to go to school and not have to work like they did." Alicia who had worked in the fields "cutting asparagus" was somewhat apprehensive about achieving a bachelor's degree. Although she had her husband's full support, she felt that "one little mistake" would take her back "working out in the fields." Academic failure was "scary" for her because she realized how much she could lose if she did not accomplish her educational goals. Lupe, who had also worked as a farm laborer, described her childhood as "doing hard farm laboring." She wanted a "better" life for herself and explained, "inside my heart I wanted something different [but it was not] until I had my kids when I realized that I wanted them to have a better option." It was that realization that prompted her decision to pursue a higher education degree.

Participants' academic resilience to succeed in college was propelled by several factors. For Gaby doing well in her classes and being a strong role model for her children was one way she could "get a good job" so she would not have to work as hard

as her parents had. At the same time, she recognized that her parents' strong work ethic had allowed her to own "nice things" and to have choices in her adolescence and adult life. Alicia's resilience was driven by the fear of failure and having to go back to working in the fields. In spite of this fear, Alicia's internal locus of control allowed her to take responsibility of this fear and cope with challenges that arose on a consistent basis while pursuing a degree. Finally, Lupe was resolved to go to college when she realized how important it was to give her children a different life trajectory which consisted of responsible behavior and a good education. She decided to break the chain of traditional female roles within her family and choose a different path so that more opportunities could be made available for her children.

### *Language Issues and Resilience*

For participants who were not born in the United States, learning academic English and earning good grades was an enormous challenge. Beatrice explained she was wrongfully placed in a special education classroom:

I was very shy to express myself [in English and Spanish]. I was always quiet ( . . . ) that made them think, oh, she doesn't talk, she has a problem. But it wasn't that I didn't want to talk, it was that I was afraid and embarrassed of what I knew and if I would pronounce it wrong.

Lupe did not feel supported by teachers who assumed she did not understand what they were saying in English. She stated, "[Teachers] thought I was not capable of thinking, so I had to prove myself, but it took me years to overcome that ( . . . ) it was not me, the dumb one, it was the teacher[s]." Alicia remembered being told by educators that "if you speak two languages ( . . . ) Spanish is going to hinder the English." So instead of developing a strong academic proficiency in her native Spanish language, she and her siblings spoke English as much as possible while stifling their oral and written skills in Spanish. As an adult Alicia felt stigmatized because educators assumed Spanish was her stronger language and she was continually placed in English-as-a-Second-Language classes. In each case, participants had to overcome specific stereotypes related to assumptions about their language. In doing so, they developed strong coping skills upon which they depended to advance them further in their academic careers.

## **Discussion**

It was evident from the interviews that the participants knew before they began the process of pursuing a bachelor's degree that they faced an uphill battle. Family support for most participants generally was limited by the lack of family members who could assist them in the college entrance process (e.g., application process, financial aid, program prerequisites). Participants relied on former teachers and counselors to get the information they needed. Unfortunately that information was not always supportive or helpful, especially when negative assumptions were made about participants'

abilities or backgrounds. For example, a college advisor assumed Olivia was of unauthorized status and had discouraged her from applying to college.

The dichotomy between maintaining traditional roles of wife and mother and pursuing a college degree was constantly at the forefront of the participants' decisions. Participants strived to balance these two worlds in order to set an example for both their male and female children. They wanted to be strong Latina mothers who were present in every way and, at the same time, demonstrate to their children the need to follow one's own path and dreams. Much in the same way that support through sacrifice was evidenced by some of the participants' parents giving up their own ambitions to provide opportunities for their daughters, the Latina participants made great sacrifices by obtaining higher education degrees. As Olivia tearfully explained,

Dammit, I've missed so much because of this school ( . . . ) But you gain stuff. And at the same time I have missed a ton of it, my kids. We're talking about my life! But now reflecting on that I feel like, well yeah, I missed it, but because I want better for myself.

### *Implications and Recommendations*

The information gathered from the two focus-group interviews points to the importance of implementing support systems for historically underserved populations. For Latinas who have had no experience with negotiating higher education, providing exposure to higher educational institutions while in public schools is a crucial first step. High school students can benefit greatly from college visits, informational seminars, or programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination. Since family support plays a major role in many Latina's lives, inviting and involving *la familia* in the decision-making processes that lead to attending college and pursuing higher education degrees is also critical. Furthermore, outreach efforts to Latinas must be improved at the community college and university levels by immediately connecting them with supportive organizations, educators, and peers who can help them adjust to their new school environment. Institutions and departments need to be proactive in providing Latinas with information and experiences that make them feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their new academic homes and, at the same time, the knowledge and resources needed to be academically successful (Espinoza, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The participants in this study were confronted by various factors that challenged their efforts at completing their degrees. Among them were language barriers, the dichotomy between "traditional" and "nontraditional" female roles within Latino culture, the pressure of family and work, and the resistance of some educators to believe in their ability to succeed. Academic resilience was manifested through participants' personal drive, a strong internal locus of control, and experiences that strengthened their resolve. For most, family support which included their parents', spouses',

and children's encouragement contributed greatly to their academic successes. Their determination to finish their degrees was enhanced by their desire to "improve" their lives and the lives of their children. In addition, experiences as seasonal farmworkers were motivating in that participants understood the value of hard work as a means to overcome serious challenges instead of allowing obstacles to prevent their ultimate success of higher education degree completion.

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**Terrence McCain**, PhD, is a professor of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and Bilingual Education at Central Washington University in Washington. He is a former Peace Corp volunteer who served in Honduras. His research focuses on language issues, international education, and globalization.

**Veronica Gomez-Vilchis** is a program specialist for Equal Opportunity and Professional Development at Central Washington University. She is interested in the training and preparation of faculty and staff who work with diverse students. She is also committed to bringing greater student diversity to all campuses affiliated with Central Washington University.