Latina Mothers and Daughters: Ways of Knowing, Being, and Becoming in the Context of Bilingual Family Science Workshops

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Building on previous research of family engagement and using perspectives drawn from Chicana/Latina feminist theories, in this ethnographic study we explored how Latina mothers and daughters negotiated and contested multiple ways of knowing during bilingual science family workshops. Our research illustrated that critical pedagogies Latina mothers enacted in spaces intersecting family, school, and community contexts and how they navigated aspects of (in)visibility, language, and womanhood were important in their daughters’ educational being and becoming. [mother–daughter pedagogies, family engagement, bilingual science, Latina adolescents]

Introduction

Family engagement is often considered central to children’s academic and social attainment in schools (Andrews 2013a; Pomerantz et al. 2007). Although progress has been made, and the current research is replete with whatshows of family engagement, a gap remains in the understanding of the ways in which family members co-construct and enact knowledge when school and community contexts intersect (Durand 2011; Elenes et al. 2001). For the last three years, we had an opportunity to work closely with Latina/o students and families in a family engagement setting we developed called Steps to College through Science bilingual family workshops (the STC workshops, hereafter). The STC workshops were part of a larger NSF-funded research project, Language-Rich Inquiry Science with English Language Learners (LISELL), which fostered and studied Latina/o emergent bilingual students’ science learning opportunities in schools and college/career preparation. During our work in the STC workshops, we engaged in what Sofia Villenas (2012) recently called ethnography de lucha (of struggle) and became particularly interested in how Latina mothers and their adolescent daughters were negotiating, contesting, and appropriating ethnic, linguistic, gendered, and educational identities as they simultaneously enacted diverse ways of knowing.

We define educational identities as fluid and multiple processes of being and becoming within and beyond time and space. Latina mothers and daughters brought forward their own life experiences, enacted critical pedagogies, and negotiated multiple meanings of educational being and becoming in the context of the STC workshops. In this setting, Latina mothers and daughters actively participated together in activities such as working with university and school teachers on science inquiry practices, interviewing, and reading poems, and they also engaged in conversations to analyze, unpack, critique, and negotiate normative processes of educational being and becoming as they enacted their
ways of knowing under the clouds of multiple oppressions (Knight et al. 2006). Drawing on Chicana/Latina feminist theories, in this research, we argue that the ways mothers and daughters enacted their ways of knowing their multiple and intersecting cultural, social, political, economic, linguistic, and gendered experiences within the contexts of family, community, and STC workshops, illustrates powerfully the ways that Latina women work together to envision processes of educational being and becoming. We begin the study by reviewing current literature on family engagement and roles of Latina mothers in their children’s education. We draw on Chicana/Latina feminism (Villenas et al. 2006) as a priori theory to formulate our research questions and to adhere to feminist sensitivities by making this study not about Latina women but for Latina women (McRobbie 2010; Zavella 2009). Next, we present a description of the STC workshops, our ethnographic work, and methods. We conclude with a discussion about how Latina mothers’ and daughters’ ways of knowing, which we encountered in this study, offer important bearings on processes of being and becoming for young immigrant women with a potential to re-envision and re-imagine collective hope that has been missing from much educational research and practice.

Latina Mothers and Family Engagement

Much of the family engagement research to date has conceptualized Latina/o family involvement from an institutional standpoint emphasizing the importance of school-based parental participation, including communication with teachers and school administration, and partaking in school-offered activities and events (Lawson and Alameda-Lawson 2012). These institutional perspectives often operate on deficit assumptions, as they correlate lack of parental presence in formal school activities with a presumed absence of familial commitment to education (Andrews 2013b; Espinoza-Herold 2007). Within this framework, research shows that Latina mothers, particularly low-income women, are frequently judged based on normative gendered roles, either because they are positioned as “illiterate” housewives or as “irresponsible” women who abandoned their homes to engage in the workforce (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998; Roesch 2004).

One way to subvert normative perspectives of mothering and reductionist views of family engagement is to promote new possibilities and imaginings of family and school involvement (Delgado-Gaitan 2005). The STC workshops were constructed with the above goal in mind. We attended closely to the previous research, which showed that for many Latina/o families the notion of educación is not limited to institutional or school-based practices (Delgado-Gaitan 2005; Villenas 2005). Family engagement in Latina/o communities is woven with broad meanings of educación that signify the importance of educational aspirations, cultural modes of being, moral and ethical values, and connections to community (Espinoza-Herold 2007). In previous ethnographic studies, researchers have documented that Latina mothers played an important role in their children’s educación through enactment of family traditions, beliefs, histories, values, cultural and personal literacies, and ways of knowing identified as mothering pedagogies (Durand 2011; Elenes et al. 2001; Urrieta 2007). Although education researchers are beginning to consider the pedagogical power of Latina mothering, to date, there is only a limited body of research that has contextualized how mothering pedagogies operate in the constitution of adolescent women’s beings and becomings in family–community–school engagement settings (Delgado-Gaitan 2005; Durand 2011; Espinoza-Herold 2007; Villenas 2005). For instance, Delgado Bernal argues that in education research it is imperative to make visible the ways that Latinas’ ways of knowing also come from experiences constituted by multiple and interlocking oppressions, not limited to “their skin color, gender, class, and English-language proficiency” (1998:561). As we witnessed mothers advocating on behalf of their
children, and especially on behalf of daughters, in the context of STC workshops, we saw the value of mothering pedagogies that encouraged Latina young adolescences to identify with school and wider community practices (Espinoza-Herold 2007). Particularly, Chicana/Latina feminist theories allowed us to see how places such as lunch tables, university classrooms, school cafeterias, those we have occupied together, signified mother–daughter-centered spaces, in which Latina women enacted educational inquiries, practiced critical pedagogies, and envisioned future academic identities (Villenas et al. 2006). In the following section, we draw on Chicana/Latina feminist theories and describe how the framework helped us to understand the role of Latina mothers’ ways of knowing, critical pedagogies, and daughters’ visions of educational being and becoming in the STC settings.

**Chicana/Latina Feminist Theories**

Chicana/Latina theories in education are situated in Latina women’s embodied experiences, practices, and their women-to-women conversations as valid and creative forms of agency and spaces of pedagogy (Delgado Bernal 1998; Elenes et al. 2001; Villenas et al. 2006). Chicana/Latina theories combine cross-disciplinary perspectives on identity formations and ways of knowing through “expos[ing] human relationships and experiences that are probably not visible from traditional patriarchal position(s) or liberal feminist standpoint(s)” (Delgado Bernal 1998:561; Villenas et al. 2006).

**Ways of Knowing.** Latina mothering and notions of educación are situated in “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being,” defined as funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005; Moll et al. 1992:133). However if funds of knowledge can be described as cultural ways of knowing that Latinas come to know within family traditions, beliefs, histories, and values (Espinoza-Herold 2007), there is also a way of knowing in Latinas’ experiences constituted under the systems of domination. Lew Zipin (2009) named these constitutions as “dark knowledge” and connected them to the oppressive experiences of families. The way of knowing through dark knowledge includes the experiences of poverty, racism, sexism, and violence. Latina women often find themselves in the middle of these dark experiences where “mothering that takes place in an ambience of anti-immigrant xenophobia involves the psychological work of teaching cultural dignity and integrity in the midst of cultural assault” (Villenas and Moreno 2001:672). In this article, we argue that education research must include different ways of knowing in order to understand and support Latina mothers’ critical pedagogies in their daughters’ identity formations and educational processes of being and becoming.

**Educación as a Process of Being and Becoming.** We situate our understanding of Latinas’ multiple and fluid identities and ways of knowing within Chicana/Latina feminist theories (Calderón et al. 2012; Delgado Bernal 1998; Villenas et al. 2006). Drawing on Villenas et al. (2006), we read identities and cultural productions of Latina adolescences in education as moving “with, from and toward different cultural practices and strategies that . . . include the family but also [through] the rejection of its patriarchy” (2006:8). Similar to the understanding of intersectionality in Women of Color feminist theories (e.g., see Hill-Collins 1998), we draw on Chicana/Latina feminist theories to situate Latina women’s ways of being and knowing within the matrix of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and language experiences. For instance, Cinthya Saavedra (2011) in her research showed that the dominant notions of language and literacy that become intertwined with other forms of domination serve not only to frame but also to position bilingual and bicultural Latina students within deficit-based and racist paradigms. Centering our analysis on the
A matrix of experiences allowed us to examine how power and dominant discourses worked in Latina mothers’ and daughters’ educational processes of being and becoming. We saw mothers in the STC setting playing important roles in the process of validating their daughters’ home, school, and cultural practices and languages as they simultaneously supported their daughters’ school-based and college-going identities, namely their being and becoming.

**Enacting Ways of Knowing.** Villenas et al. (2006) argue that in support of daughters’ educación, Latina mothers enact their ways of knowing using different cultural strategies such as familial and cultural stories, personal narratives, and advices based on their life-long everyday experiences. Villenas et al. further redefine these “everyday experiences and practices of teaching, learning, and communal ‘knowing’” as a form of engagement with educación through critical pedagogies situated in Latina mothering (2006:2). Latina critical pedagogies are namely theorizations “that these women have developed in their survival/subversion of patriarchy, poverty, and discrimination and in their interactions with often insensitive” social, political, and academic inequities (Villenas et al. 2006:2). Although Chicana/Latina feminist theories underline personal agency, they also emphasize that Latina women’s ways of knowing and their critical pedagogies include the principles and collective practices of social justice (Elenes et al. 2001). Therefore, to understand the ways in which Latina mothers enacted critical pedagogies in the STC spaces, we were “braid[ing] identities, theories, and practices” together as we subsequently worked to “advance cross-disciplinary study and transform education research” (Godinez 2006:34). Although we do not claim the ability or the right to fully contextualize, understand, and present the stories and ways of being and becoming of the Latina mothers and daughters we encountered, we find it important to share their voices while recognizing that our understandings are only partial, both informed and limited by our own multiple subjectivities that we frame as our “guilty readings” (Britzman 1991).

**Methods**

The STC workshops were geographically located in the state of Georgia, characterized by rapidly shifting human demographics, and were sociopolitically situated within the context of recent anti-immigrant discourse and policy making (Buxton et al. 2012). In 2009, we began working with science and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers in local public schools to support emergent bilingual students’ engagement with school science and to invite them to science careers. On Saturdays, we invited Latina/o families, students, family liaisons, science teachers, and ESOL teachers, as well as other guests, to participate in the STC workshops. The STC workshops took place in university, technical school, and high school settings. These settings provided the space in which Latina/o families, students, teachers, and researchers negotiated common (and occasionally contradictory) understandings, beliefs, and practices about education and steps to college. Each STC workshop was four hours long and concluded with a shared lunch, offering a space for informal conversations. Participants typically rotated through three different sessions: family conversation sessions in Spanish, bilingual science investigations sessions, and bilingual science careers sessions. Family conversation sessions, in particular, offered a space in which families and students shared their immigration experiences, life stories, personal narratives, and educational visions and goals.

The physical and material spaces were rearranged during the STC sessions such that Latina/o students often occupied the power positions in the front of the room, facing their families, their teachers, and the university researchers. Students ran many of the conversations, sharing their own stories and experiences. Mothers, fathers, and grandmothers
spoke up, asking questions and sharing their perspectives. Chicana feminist Emma Pérez (1999), in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, conceptualizes such spaces as the space to locate silences. From this perspective, the STC settings became a space to enact critical ways of knowing, listening, hearing, being, and becoming (Pérez 1999).

The majority of the families who attended the workshops grew up and were educated in México, but participants from a range of other Latin American countries attended as well. Many participants identified themselves as mainly Spanish speakers or as bilingual speakers of Spanish and English providing a “terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new [being and becoming] and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation” (Bhabha 1994:2; as cited in Pérez 1999:26). The STC workshops were conducted in English and Spanish, where families, students, teachers, and university personnel engaged in science practices bilingually in an attempt to deconstruct institutionalized classroom spaces, where Latina/o languages and cultures have been traditionally repressed (Pérez 1999). During our engagement with families in the STC setting, we became particularly interested in Latina mothers and daughters, and how they were negotiating their ethnic, linguistic, and gendered identities while producing and enacting critical pedagogies to author their own academic being and becomings. The initial and general research questions guiding this study based on *a priori* theories were:

1. How can Latina feminist theories support our critical understanding of the ways that mothers and daughters engaged together in the context of STC workshops?
2. What are the salient aspects of the lives and experiences of Latina mothers and daughters that were invoked as they considered possibilities for learning and schooling in the context of the STC workshops?
3. How can understandings of Latina mothers’ and daughters’ experiences and perspectives that emerged in the STC workshops inform theory and practice for family engagement work and research?

**Methods of Data Collection.** All families who engaged in the STC workshops were invited to participate in the corresponding longitudinal ethnographic research, what Villenas (2012) refers to as ethnography *de lucha* (of struggle). A total of 75 families signed up to participate in the research over the three-year period of the STC workshops, with mothers and daughters constituting 45 of the families. The overarching purpose of our research de lucha was talking back to deficit-based, normative institutional perspectives about Latina/o families, language, and culture by co-constructing knowledge with families in the STC workshop setting. We employed various ethnographic methods of data collection during STC workshops, including observations, recording of field notes, participant interviews, and continuous formal and informal dialogues. In addition we kept large chart-paper notes, recording conversations bilingually for participants to see during workshop activities.

**Participants and Data Analysis.** Based on research by Gery Ryan and H. Russel Bernard (2003), we used an inductive approach along with Chicana/Latina feminist standpoints as *a priori* theory to explore the primary data from 45 Latina women and their daughters. In the first stage of the analysis, our goal was to better understand the ways of knowing that Latina mothers and daughters enacted and produced within the STC spaces. We approached the data inductively, using both categorizing and connecting approaches (Maxwell and Miller 2008). The codes and categories we developed were based on *a priori* feminist “theoretical sensitivities” to discover connections and differences between the prior research and the data at hand (Strauss and Corbin 1990:41). By feminist theoretical sensitivity, we refer to what Patricia Zavella describes as reading the data being “sensitive
to differences between subjects and ourselves as well, and aware of the possible power relations involved in doing research by, about, and for women, and . . . a diversity of women’s experiences based on race, class, and sexual preferences” (2009:187). Although this process assisted us in highlighting Latina mothers and daughters’ voices and stories, we treated the initial analytical approach as our own “guilty readings.” In order to make visible Latina insiders’ perspectives and to co-construct knowledge together, in the second stage of the analysis, we asked a group of Latina mothers and daughters to help us to analyze, theorize, and contextualize the findings. In this process, we utilized an “information-oriented selection” method (Flyvbjerg 2011:37), and we identified three focal Latina mothers and their daughters who agreed to share their rich knowledge and experience in the analysis of our initial findings. In the end, three distinct but interrelated themes developed: being and becoming through (in)visibility, language, and womanhood. Table 1 provides detailed information about the three mothers and their daughters: Valencia and Alanza, Laura and Jasmine, Ramona and Carmen. In the research reported here, we mostly highlight the voices and analysis based on the experiences of these three mothers and their daughters who had attended the STC workshops for three consecutive years. We argue that what is presented in this study is more than the empirical data. As Villenas et al. say, these are “women-centered definitions of teaching, learning and ways of knowing rooted in Chicana/Latina theories and visions of life community, and the world” (2006:2).

Findings

The analysis of our three-year ethnographic data set illustrated how participant Latina mothers enacted a range of critical pedagogies, in the form of cuentos (stories) and consejos
(advice), that were used to validate daughters’ home language, cultural, and familial knowledge, as mothers were simultaneously appropriating school-based knowledge and learning. Some of these findings parallel findings from previous research with Latina women (Villenas and Moreno 2001). Latina women’s cuentos and consejos in the STC spaces highlighted the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, language, and gendered experiences as sources of knowledge about being and academic becomings (Espinoza-Herold 2007). Latina women’s critical pedagogies illustrated the ways in which women in the community identified with the matrix of oppressions and accomplishments in different ways. For instance, during the family conversation session in the STC, a first year college student Latina addressed a group of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, sons, and daughters, as well as teachers, to raise awareness of the struggles Latina women navigate through to continue to pursue a formal education. Her story brought to the surface day-to-day systematic challenges along with personal, familial, and communal hope that young immigrant Latina women carry with themselves (Delgado Bernal 2001):

I wanted to get an education. Toward finishing my high school I asked the college counselor about opportunities for going to college. He said that I could not go to college because I was undocumented. I said to myself, there must be some other ways. I did not tell what the counselor told me to my parents because my father did not want me to go to college. He didn’t believe that it was possible or that it would do anything good for my future. I did not give up. I found [this] college; they told me that they would accept me. They helped me to search and apply for scholarships through different organizations that supported Hispanic students. Now I am taking classes. I am telling you this because you should not give up. You should support your children, your daughters if they want to continue their education. Your teachers, parents, or someone out there will be willing to help you. Just do not give up.

The Latina college student’s example allowed participants, including science and ESOL teachers, mothers, fathers, adolescent girls and boys, and other family members, to recognize that institutionalized problems in schools operated through exclusionary practices directed at the most vulnerable students. In previous research, Angela Valenzuela (2010) argued that in the United States some discriminatory practices are enacted within “caring” conditions of schools through subtractive practices towards Latina/o students. For example, when Latina/o students and families hear the authorities, such as college counselors, saying that immigrant youth cannot attend college due to their documentation status, this is a subtractive practice that can frustrate parents’ hopes about children’s future education. As the conversation above continued, participants also began to analyze this event from the perspective of stereotypical macho attitudes of Latino fathers toward their daughters (Yosso 2006). A common aspect of the deficit framing around higher levels of high school drop out and lower levels of college enrollment among Latino/as is that Latina/o culture (and Latino males in particular) make short-sighted decisions that value immediate low-skill work over delayed higher-skill opportunities afforded by continued education. However, participants in this conversation, including Latino fathers, did not frame this attitude as a cultural deficit but instead as another manifestation of ways of knowing. Even the Latina college student who told us her story did not blame her father but rather positioned him as a father whose hopes were stripped away within his own experiences of class, gender, immigration, and language oppression and the realities of employment opportunities available to Latina/o youth in the United States. The Latina college student told the audience that by attending the STC workshop and telling her story to Latina/o families, youth, and especially to fathers she was hoping to take a small step toward subverting the reproduction of these realities. Telling and hearing such stories in the space of a college classroom, along with peers, teachers, college representatives, and family members, afforded the women an opportunity to examine the forms of oppression that they often experienced while also finding opportunities to articulate their own voices.
Exploring steps to college was legitimated and appropriated in this space and became critical to understanding the effects of racism, sexism, and classism on Latinas who were committed to cultural educación and continuing formal education in the process of being and becoming (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Latina mothers’ and daughters’ stories about their experiences characterized the “themes of survival, power, and identity formation, [the] importance of working for physical survival of children, [and the] significance of self-definition in constructing individual identity” within the oppressive spaces, including formal education (Glenn et al. 1994). In this way, traditionally marginalizing spaces such as university campuses and classrooms began to be transformed into creative spaces and spaces for collective growth for all of us who were present there. Sharing stories, hearing their own stories and stories of others, were important points of departure for Latina mothers and daughters who were crafting creative ways of being and becoming through “listening to how the arguments against them are framed, and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002:27).

When we shared our findings with our focal group of three Latina mothers and daughters to help us reflect on our initial readings of the data, they underlined the fabric of hidden deficit views evident in the findings. One of the deficit perspectives that the focal group of Latina women articulated and worked to disrupt was the discourse that Latino families do not support their children’s education in the ways that would be beneficial in the formal school settings (Valenzuela 2010). The discourse of academic support was coupled with the normative discourses around the notions of the care for education in Latino families (Elenes and Delgado Bernal 2009). Latina mothers had to talk back against the deficit assumptions repeatedly, in the words of Ramona, “We care about our children’s education, that’s why we are here, even if it is a Saturday. Why would they think that we do not care?” When the STC workshop group discussed President Obama’s second inauguration bilingual poem (Blanco 2013), Carmen (Ramona’s daughter) shared aloud with the group a stanza that she used to talk back to deficit discourses she had encountered.

One ground. Our ground, rooting us to every stalk of corn, every head of wheat sown by sweat and hands, hands gleaning coal or planting windmills in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands digging trenches, routing pipes and cables, hands as worn as my father’s cutting sugarcane so my brother and I could have books and shoes.

Carmen explained that these parts of the poem reminded her of the sacrifices her parents have been making for her and for her brother to get an education. She said, “My parents work very hard so my brother and I could study.” Carmen and others used these examples of personal struggle to talk back to a system that they saw as positioning their families as “not caring about education” (Elenes and Delgado Bernal 2009). Carmen used this poem to assert a view of her parents and their ways of practicing parenthood as one of a life-long sacrifice. Her example talked back to the deficit discourses about Latina/o families and their attitudes towards their children’s education, which Carmen saw as circulating in the school system as regularly reinforced acts of marginalization. To give an example of how this kind of discourse is produced, Latina mothers and daughters reported how their culture and language were consistently delegitimized and subtracted from the formal spaces of schooling (Valenzuela 2010). Through discourses of white middle-class cultural norms and English-only regulations, Latina/os were continuously reminded of what Carmen referred to as others’ assertions that “this is America and we speak English here.” These stories reflected “the cultural tensions inherent within being
Latin[a] in the US and to experience educational success” through which Latina mothers had to teach their daughters how to navigate (De Jesús 2003:148).

**Being and Becoming within (In)visibility.** During the STC workshops, Latina mothers and daughters used examples of struggles for education and other aspects of their lives that were perceived invisible in the broader society and at times even within their own community (Delgado Bernal 2001). For instance, mothers and daughters were very keen to reject the patriarchy and positioning of women as less than men (Villenas et al. 2006). The women underlined the importance of education, and critiqued the normative notions that connected education to occupational hierarchies. Our focal participants came from different educational backgrounds and carried out various jobs and responsibilities. The three daughters drew our attention to these differences during one of the lunches at the end of a workshop. Regardless of their mother’s occupation or the differences among life stories, the daughters described and positioned Latina mothers as exceptionally smart, hardworking, and willing to sacrifice their own personal goals and desires for the betterment of their children. For instance, Alanza contested the notion that Latinas were only good at certain things. Although Valencia, Alanza’s mother, described her own education and literacy as limited due to her restricted time and opportunity for formal learning, Alanza reframed Valencia’s experience as a strength and a model in her own becoming. In Alanza’s words:

> You know my mom is the strongest person. She could do anything she wants, but she decided to put us before anything else. ...Women can be anything, they can be police officers and they can go to the army. ... in school and in society they treat girls differently.

Alanza reframed normative notions of strength and success. For Alanza, Latina women had to be very strong to be able to sacrifice their own personal attainment for their children. Latina women worked as hard as anyone else, but that work was largely invisible (Villenas and Moreno 2001). Alanza continued, elaborating and emphasizing her view of women, “You know, my mom has a friend and she is a police officer. My mom told me her story. She tells me women can be anything.” Using this example, Alanza pointed out how Valencia’s critical pedagogy subverts normative gender stereotypes and helps them to imagine new becoming.

> You don’t hear people talk about their moms, they talk about their dads, like they say, “My dad is a firefighter,” but they do not say, “My mom is something.”

For Latina mothers, the notion of invisibility operated at the multiple and interlocking levels of racism, sexism, classism, and immigration status (Villenas and Moreno 2001). Alanza identified Latina women, just like other women, who could choose to be housewives or police officers. Countering the dominant discourse of worthy occupation, Alanza argued that both choices should be viewed as equally important, challenging, and valid. Alanza’s analysis illuminated the fact that Latina women’s ways of knowing worked as a critical pedagogy of struggle to validate their experiences against language, gender, and racial stereotypes. Similarly, Alanza’s mother Valencia’s words vividly enacted critical pedagogies:

> Why do they see us differently? We work very hard for this country. Our men go to the highway early in the morning at four or five o’clock and wait for someone to pick them up to work. It does not matter if it is hot or cold. When there is a job they work until very late. Sometimes we wait for them until 12 or one in the night, hoping that they will be back.

> Valencia’s example highlights the ways in which Latina/os become invisible as laborers, although as she argues Latina/os often work the longest hours and take on the hardest jobs. She also suggests that as Latina/o immigrants, being positioned “differently” (in
terms of language, skin color, and culture), allowed racism, classism, and sexism to render Latina/o contributions as laborers as invisible. Despite the fact that Valencia identified financial, structural, and linguistic constraints on her family, she used these experiences not as barriers but as ways of knowing to support her daughter in her educational and career goals (Yosso 2006). Valencia taught her daughter to use these constraints as a starting point to work hard at school, to make the right choices, and as a way of knowing in the process of educational being and becoming. These were critical and powerful pedagogies for Latina early adolescents’ educational and future visions. As Alanza said, “You know, girls can be anything, they can be a president. I work very hard and I make the right choices, and even my teachers tell me that I can be anything.” In the initial analysis, our guilty readings of the data connected the notions of free choice, hard work, and exceptionality to the theme of an idealized discourse of the American Dream, and, from our point of view, our participants’ unquestioned idea that in America, if you work hard enough, you will be successful. But when we shared our readings with the Latina mothers and daughters, they disrupted our initial interpretations and provided us with a more nuanced reading. Accordingly, to these Latina women, the context of immigration at the discursive level produced the realities for the construction of visible/invisible others—“invisible as ‘ghost’ workers, yet highly visible as families needing education and health care” (Villenas 2001:5). Latina mothers and daughters subverted and reinscribed these constructions in agentic and creative ways. They did not allow oppressive experiences to limit the new Latina/o generation’s opportunities in the process of educational being and becoming. Using critical pedagogies, mothers invited their children to work hard within the educational system and reframed their (in)visibility as a creative and powerful space. Thus, our participants’ view of the notion of the American Dream was not as idealized as we had initially posited.

Alanza confronted us and challenged us to consider our own assumptions as she said, “Why are you here, why do you organize these workshops? And why us. . .? Is it because our parents do not speak English or the language of science?” Alanza questioned why parents seemed to be invisible at school, with their roles as supporters of their children’s schooling and learning not acknowledged. Then, in the STC context, she saw parents being made visible but suggested that it was perhaps in disempowering ways, as maybe they were positioned as parents who lacked knowledge and needed guidance to help their children to go to college or to see the opportunities that can arise from studying science fields.

Ways of Knowing and Language. Our findings illustrated how the expression of mothers’ ways of knowing often intersected with a prioritizing of English language proficiency in public schools and with ideas about everyday and academic language that were also a focus of the STC workshops. When talking about language, the Latina daughters were very careful not to fall into the trap of framing their mothers’ language in a deficit perspective. Their arguments and stories talked back to the deficit framing of Latina mothers as needing English language education, judged against the norms of middle-class white English (Villenas 2001). For instance, Ramona, who is Carmen’s mother, told a group that she only recently started learning English despite her presence in the United States for the last 15 years. Carmen was quick to jump in and say, “my mom only decided to learn English to help us with our homework.” Twelve-year-old Carmen explained her stance on language as follows:

I think it’s just your surroundings that change it [how you talk]. Like, your environment depends, or you depend on your environment, and so, if you’re in a different environment, you’re gonna act differently, you’re gonna speak differently, and you’re gonna look differently. I mean, if someone
just sees you from one perspective, they might think the wrong way about you, but I think it just happens automatically depending on your surroundings.

Carmen spoke to the notions of preconceptions and how people are positioned based on their looks, accents, and ways of talking. Latina daughters recognized the way their mothers were positioned in U.S. society because of the color of their skin and the language they spoke. The young adolescents frequently reiterated the benefits of knowing two languages, and our conversations typically ended up with problematizations of discourses, which connect language ability to notions of smartness. Latina young adolescents challenged equating smartness with normative forms of language proficiency. When we shared these findings in one of our lunchtime conversations, one of our focal participants, 12-year old Jasmine, explained her stance as following:

In science, we use words such as properties of matter or the way the body functions, instead of saying characteristics of matter or the way the body works, because our teachers say it shows higher order thinking.

One of the Latina mothers then asked her to explain what higher order thinking meant and if it signified that people who use these words are “smarter” than people who use “everyday” words. Jasmine immediately corrected her previous explanation with an example from her own everyday experiences:

No, no! My mother may speak a little English or have an accent, but she is the smartest person. She corrects my homework, and sometimes my teachers give wrong problems, and my mom sends that homework back to school with the corrections. The difference in words is just the way you have been educated. I know these words because we use them in school. But you may also use the everyday words, but you may mean the same thing that I mean. It is just you were not taught this word or to communicate this way. But no, language does not tell anything about anyone. People may think that way, but it’s not right.

As illustrated in Jasmine’s words, her teachers, and even the researchers in the STC workshops, often emphasized the academic ways of speaking as being indicative of higher order thinking, but according to Jasmine, the discourses around language are more nuanced. She explained cogently how words such as function are used in the context of science for a reason, that replacing function with the word works would not give the same scientific meaning. Jasmine also explained that equating one’s language with one’s intelligence serves to unfairly reduce ways of knowing to ways of speaking. She argued that it was important to recognize that a person’s facility with academic language depended on whether or not they had been exposed to the specific ways that language was used in academic settings (Gebhard and Harman 2011). As Jasmine elaborated:

When you say the way my body works, I understand that we are talking about the way I move my hands and legs, how each part moves as part of the whole, but when you say the way my body functions, it makes me think about more details, about cells and organs.

While Jasmine was very clear in her previous example that her mother’s, or anyone else’s, nonperformance of academic language did not equate to a lack of knowledge, with this example she also highlighted the functional properties of language. At the same time, Jasmine does not locate functional usages of language in a duality with ways of knowing. At this point in the conversation, Jasmine’s mother, Laura, challenged Jasmine with the notions of a universal scientific language. Laura posed the critical question of whether academic language was really functional out of “natural” necessity and continued:

No, I don’t think so. I think they [scientists] do not want ordinary people to understand what they are doing. Because I really like science, and I always want to learn more. When I watch TV or read
news and there is something about science, they say go and find out more, let’s say, here. But then
when I go and try to read I do not understand it. Like here in the workshop, [the professor] uses
Spanish and English to do science with families because he wants us to know what he is doing. He
wants it to be accessible. I do not think others really want ordinary people to understand it.

Laura’s argument provided evidence that she used different ways of learning science,
through different modes of communicative genres such as watching TV news, documentaries,
newspapers; however, the science as a disciplinary systematic language was often
not accessible to her. Jasmine agreed with her mother and reiterated, “the way we talk only
shows the way we were taught, it just shows our experience with one or another way of
doing it.” Laura’s limited English did not signify a lack of knowledge to Jasmine. In fact,
Jasmine argued that her mother, Laura, knew a lot more than her teachers because her
knowledge came from different sources. Conceptualizing ways of knowing as a cultural
resource helped Latina young adolescents to make connections between formal and informal
spaces of learning, where they validated their own being and simultaneously imagined becoming—as women, as individuals with careers—in relation to varied language
practices (Delgado Bernal 2001).

Enacting Womanhood. As previous research has shown (Cammarota 2004; Villenas and
Moreno 2001), Latinas’ mothering often attends to the tensions and contradictions in their
daughters’ learning to see themselves as mujeres (women) with constraints and limitations
imposed by others on one hand, and hopes, dreams, and possibilities of achievement on
the other (Yosso 2006). In our study, Latina mothers’ critical pedagogy focused on disrupt-
ing normative notions of education and opening up possibilities and opportunities for
their daughters, while simultaneously negotiating the choices young adolescents make
(Espinoza-Herold 2007). Our initial analysis illustrated how mothers frequently reminded
their daughters about three things in relation to their college aspirations: being respon-
sible, choosing a career they will like, and not getting into trouble with teachers. Here is
an example how Ramona and Carmen discussed these ideas:

Carmen: What do you think I need to do in middle school so I can go to a university or college in
the future?
Ramona: I think you have to be responsible. Do your work, your homework, and be respectful
with the teachers so you don’t get in any trouble. No trouble, and just study hard. Do your best.
Carmen: What characteristics do I have as a student that can help me go to college or university?
Ramona: That you are smart, intelligent, and determined. And you are disciplined. If you want to
do something, you focus on it and you do it. Just do it. It doesn’t matter if you have many things
at the same time, you still do what you want to do or what you have to do.

Our own guilty readings of the dialogue above initially led our coding to illustrate
inherent contradictions in the stances taken by the mothers and daughters. However, our
focal group of Latina mothers and daughters again disrupted our own normative inter-
pretations. Parts of the critical pedagogies that we initially positioned as contradictions
were (re)positioned by our participants as lessons learned from the dark funds of knowl-
edge of Latina women. For instance, the mothers connected (in)visibility and language
norms to a construct of Latina womanhood, or in one of the participant’s words, how “it
is hard to be a girl.” In Valencia’s words during a shared meal after a STC workshop,

I tell her [my daughter] that Spanish is as important as English because it is her language. But it is
hard to be a girl because people easily tell you what to do. In her school when she was speaking
with her friend in Spanish, boys come to her and say that this is America, no Spanish here. She
needs to speak up. When you are shy, boys can make fun of you.

Valencia’s advice provides a glimpse of how race, language, gender, and class can
work together to oppress Latina mothers and daughters on a day-to-day basis. Valencia,
though, (re)positioned language as power, suggesting that speaking English well would serve as a protection for young adolescents, helping them to stand up for themselves. Latina mothers advised their daughters to take up certain normative and stereotypical identities such as “good girl” deliberately and strategically because their battles were larger than the fight for language. Moreover, mothers acknowledged the differences between their experiences and those of their daughters, and legitimized the notion of choice as another way of cultivating their daughters’ sense of becoming. These were critical pedagogies necessary both for survival within an oppressive system and for being and becoming in ways that may gradually subvert those oppressive structures over time (Delgado Bernal 2001). This kind of pedagogy instructed girls to channel their energy into “self-direction/self-determination for living and practicing ethical standards, respeto (respect), and educación” (Elenes et al. 2001:596).

Latina mothers embodied in their pedagogies their own practice, their own life stories of resistance, survival, and sacrifice. These embodiments were used to teach their daughters how to navigate complex spaces of emerging womanhood. In Alanza’s words “my mom being here [at the STC workshop] with me and doing science shows a lot.” Alanza, who was very critical of the way women were portrayed in society, often critiqued racist and sexist attitudes towards Latina women. For example, Alanza described her own mother’s work—her cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the household—as significant, creative, and empowering work.

My mom does not have any time for herself because she works very hard at home. She takes care of our family and my siblings. She is the best example of hard work and sacrifice. She will do anything for me and my brother.

Similarly, daughters Carmen and Jasmine were very sensitive when talking about the interplay between future academic aspirations and Latina womanhood and motherhood, such that one was never privileged at the expense of the other. Latina daughters wanted to make sure that their mothers’ sacrifices and hard work made on behalf of children were positioned as equally valuable as the hard academic work that they themselves were pursuing. Similarly, mothers supported their daughters’ personal agency, while their critical pedagogies simultaneously embodied communal struggles between the value of Latinas’ traditional familial responsibilities and the value of self-expression through pursuing a career (Espinoza-Herold 2007). Latina mothers and daughters (re)-positioned each other as “agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience, research, community, and social change” (Delgado Bernal 1998:560).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to a gap in the literature pointed to by prominent Latina and Chicana scholars (see Delgado-Gaitan 2005; Elenes et al. 2001; Villenas 2005) whose collective work calls us to recognize the sociocultural, political, racialized, and gendered experiences of Latina women and multiple ways of knowledge they enact in family engagement settings. We believe that studies such as this one have potential to disrupt the assumptions about immigrant Latino/a families lacking educational aspirations while making visible the matrix of interlocking oppressions that Latina women are exposed to in educational terrains (Delgado-Gaitan 2005). The Latina mothers and daughters in the STC workshops were aware of these assumptions and worked to subvert these oppressions in creative ways through their critical pedagogies and ways of knowing. Adriana Hernández has argued that pedagogical practices occurring in a variety of spaces can serve as signifi-
cant “spheres of cultural production in general, and are engaged in the construction and negotiation of knowledge and identities” (1997:13). As scholars and activists committed to creating dynamic opportunities for educational equity for immigrant families, we have the obligation to better understand the complexity and implications of the multiple ways of knowing, being, and becoming through which Latina mothers and daughters engage with each other and with their broader communities.

We believe that these findings can help educators, public policy makers, and researchers who are concerned with creating new ways of engaging immigrant families in their children’s schooling, to imagine spaces that foster dialogues integrating the families’ and community’s funds of knowledges, including dark knowledge. The mothers’ and daughters’ voices seem to tell us that they need safe educational spaces, spaces where their social, cultural, ethnic, gendered and language experiences and their ways of knowing are validated; where their being and future becomings are legitimized; a space where “silences, when heard, become the negotiating spaces for the decolonizing subject . . . [where] agency is articulated” (Pérez 1999:5) and where Latina families can draw their visions of steps to college, a space where they can invite all of us to grapple with the possibilities and complexities of pursuing new visions. For instance, a primary goal of the STC workshops was to create sites where students, parents, teachers, and researchers can work together to envision the future of science studies and careers. Given the underrepresentation of Latino/a youth in higher education generally, and in STEM fields in particular (Litow 2008; Musetti and Tolbert 2010; Tienda 2009), we viewed science-focused family engagement programs for bilingual immigrant families as critical to the future of STEM fields. In the current study, we chose to highlight what we saw as mothers’ and daughters’ insistent voices calling for ways of knowing and critical pedagogy that were missing from our initial conceptualizations of our work. Our research argues that without first acknowledging and making sense of the multiple and interlocking experiences, knowledges, and identities that Latina women bring to formal educational sites, we cannot talk in sufficiently informed ways about girls’ science or STEM identities or their underrepresentation in these fields.

Moreover, the voices of our participants both support and add nuance to the claim made by other scholars that Latina women do not need to be persuaded to engage in science or enter STEM fields in the future, and that indeed, women are “fighting desperately not to be spewed out” of this pipeline due to multiple and intersecting inequities (Johnson et al. 2011:363). Failing to recognize Latina women’s ways of knowing and their critical pedagogies as part of our own education can be another form of inequity and injustice in which we insist that Latinas “step away from one identity to achieve another” (Johnson et al. 2011:363). Latinas’ everyday knowledge will remain an important part of their being and future becomings. Three pairs of Latina mothers’ and daughters’ perspectives and voices were critical in reframing our own ways of knowing and being in relation to this work. Latina mothers’ and daughters’ ways of knowing that we encountered in this work offered important bearings on our own understandings of being and becoming with a potential to foster a vision of hope for a better future for immigrant women in this country. These voices will continue to inform our critical inquiry about ourselves as researchers committed to social justice and will inspire new ways of engaging with families of immigrant and Latina/o youth.

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Notes

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