

Latina Student Mothers'

in the Community College

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Abstract

Latinx are one of the fastest growing demographic groups in the country and their growth is visible in higher education. Using focus groups with student mothers, we examine the narratives of four Latina student mothers pursuing higher education at the community college. Using Chicana Feminist Theory as our theoretical framework, we apply *trenzas de identidades* (Godínez, 2006; Montoya, 1994) as a metaphorical and analytical tool to understand the experiences of Latina community college student mothers. The student mothers' *trenzas de identidades* demonstrate the ways their mother, student, and professional identities intersect and influence how they experience and navigate the educational pipeline. We call upon higher education faculty and administrators to reject deficit ideologies of Latina student mothers, and we offer recommendations for creating a receptive environment for them.

Keywords: Chicana/Latina, student, mother, parent, motherhood, community college, education, pipeline, metaphor, *trenzas de identidades*, braids

Introduction

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Student mothers, like Anayeli, juggle parenting, family obligations, jobs, and school commitments, leaving little time or energy to participate in anything else. In college campuses, the parenting status of student parents is not recognized as an important part of their identities and experiences (National Center for Student Parent Programs, 2017). As a result, student parents, particularly Latina¹ student mothers, have received scant attention in the academic literature on the community college student experience (Oliva & Jiménez, 2017). Here, we analyze what these educational experiences look like for Chicana/Latina student mothers and

we introduce *trenzas de identidades* as a metaphorical and analytical tool for understanding the experiences of Latina student mothers at the community college. We then discuss the research site and methods. Subsequently, we introduce analysis of each strand: motherhood, student, and professional. We conclude with recommendations.

Latina Student Mothers in Higher Education

The number of Latinas in higher education has increased substantially over the past decades (Sapp, Marquez Kiyama, & Dache-Gerbino, 2016). However, their rate of degree attainment compared to non-Latina peers is relatively low (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Chicana/Latina students in higher education face unique challenges and barriers in postsecondary education, including access to college admissions information (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2008), financial aid (Perna, 2006), citizenship status (Gonzalez, 2016), and campus climate (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Villalpando, 2003).

Explanations for college access and educational opportunities for Latinas have relied historically on gendered explanations emphasizing *marianismo*—Latinas' self-sacrificing role, underscoring women's roles inside the home (Sy & Brittan, 2008). This deficit explanation sees Latinas as incapable of succeeding as students while taking care of family. However, what is seen as a weakness is actually a strength. As Delgado Bernal (2006) found when examining the role of family in the educational experiences of Chicana college students, Chicana students draw on their "bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spirituality" to overcome challenges and barriers to academic achievement (p.118). They also rely on counselors, teachers, and friends to address barriers while in college (Sapp et al., 2016).

Chicana/Latinas face stereotypes that reduce their multi-dimensional and complex identities to oversimplified binaries as "college-bound/drop-out, good/bad; sexually promiscuous/academically talented" (Sapp et al., 2016, p. 42). Student mothers must negotiate the presumed conflicts between the binaries of mother/student, good mother/good student, as well as the socially constructed narrative of the "good" versus "bad" mother (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lynch, 2008). Literature on student mothers focus primarily on the graduate level (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; González, 2007; Lynch, 2008; Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid 2009), with little attention to community college student mothers, rendering them "unexplored

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challenging academia's continuous attempt to separate these identities. She argues that "we are often stronger and more complete" (p. 135) when we weave together these identities, but they can also "overlap, merge, collide, and sustain each other" (p. 147).

Espino et al. (2010) also theorize how multiple strands of their identities have shaped their doctoral education. They use *testimonio* to analyze how their *trenzas de identidades multiples* of motherhood, social class, and public intellectual have shaped their transitions from graduate school to faculty positions at different institutions. Quiñones (2016) uses a methodological application of *trenzas* around the notion of being a well-educated person to understand the experiences of six Latina teachers in New York and found that her Puerto Rican teachers took a bilingual-bicultural stance employing a broader view of what it means to be a well-educated person.

Trenzas de identidades allows us to explore the experiences of Latina student mothers at the community college as they weave the three main strands of their braided identity: mother, student, and professional (Dolores Bernal, 2008; Godínez, 2006). These three strands intersect and influence how they navigate the educational pipeline to find their way to success. What makes *trenzas* particularly relevant to Chicana/Latinas is the way relationships among them are shaped by the actual physical process of braiding each other's hair. Professor of Law, Zuni Cruz comments that, from an indigenous perspective, braids allow her to connect to her ancestors, both male and female relatives who wore braids. For her, braids are "a link to [her] grandfather" (Montoya et al., 2009, p.179). We recognize that our goal of centering *trenzas de identidad* explicitly as a Chicana framework is not new; however, it is one that is rarely used to understand the experiences of Latina community college student mothers.

We utilize one *trenza* with three strands: student, mother, and professional identities. The order of the strands does not matter; however, what we have found in our research is that the strand of motherhood is more salient. It is nearly impossible nor do we want to separate each strand of their *trenza* because the strands are interconnected. As Caballero, Pérez-Torres, Martínez-

the participants was important, particularly with the student parents who did not know the researchers. To do so, we shared our experiences as former student parents navigating the educational pipeline while parenting, we also allowed the participants the opportunity to ask us questions and reach out to us beyond the focus group if they needed any social support.

Focus interviews were recorded and transcribed by both researchers. Focus groups allow the opportunity to collectively engage other student mothers in ways that otherwise would not happen (Wilkinson, 1998). We followed the tradition of qualitative research of coding, which involves "bringing together and analyzing all the data on major themes, ideas, concepts, interpretations, and propositions" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 151). The codes that were more recurring across interviews became the core codes. After identifying core codes we underwent a careful line-by-line reading with the aim of identifying additional instances and variations of the core codes. The core codes that we focus on in this manuscript are mother, student, and professional identities in the community college pipeline and serve as the basis of our analysis.

Out of the 13 students who participated in the focus group, we chose to focus on four self-identified Latina student mothers: Anayeli, Adriana, Krystal, and Rosa to demonstrate how their various and complex identities affected how they navigated higher education and their professional goals. We focus on these four participants because it became evident in the focus group transcripts the common intersectional and interwomen identities of mother, student, and professional. The narratives also show how the student mothers worked out some of the tensions in their *trenza* such as choosing a career that provides them the flexibility to "be there" for their children. What we present here comes from a place of care and respect for respondents who entrusted us with their lived experiences. Pseudonyms are used for the participants who requested their anonymity.

Findings: Intertwining Chicana/Latina Student Mothers'

The following narratives outline the student mothers' *trenzas de identidades*. The student mothers' *trenzas de identidades* capture how their motherhood, student, and professional identities influence how they navigate and experience the community college. We understand each identity to be a part of or a strand of the students mothers' *trenzas de identidades*. Each

motherhood. McDermott and Graham (2005) assert that "early motherhood has become synonymous with a number of social 'problems,'" particularly for women who become mothers

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for extended periods of time and returning later in life. For Anayeli, Krystal, and Rosa, a better future for their children was central to the choice to further their education, but it took time for them to realize this, due to financial instability. Motherhood delayed Anayeli and Rosa's enrollment in postsecondary education because they needed to figure out their lives as new mothers. As young and single mothers they dealt with the everyday circumstances of life—worrying about money, food, and shelter for their kids, and dealing with the pressures from over their single mother status. Motherhood is an underappreciated and unacknowledged journey because motherhood is assumed to come naturally.

As discussed earlier, Anayeli faced a series of challenges that delayed her matriculation at Pacific Coast Community College. In the Fall of 2009, she enrolled at Pacific Coast Community College and stayed for two semesters. She stopped because her partner at the time did not support her. She tried to maintain a relationship with her daughter's biological dad,

become a victim of fraud by the for-profit institution, Heald College. She tried enrolling first at Pacific Coast Community College in 2010 when she was pregnant, but she did not get the help she needed. All Rosa wanted to know when she tried to enroll in Pacific Coast Community College was “what is FAFSA”? She sought help from the financial aid office, but in effect they blocked her from receiving that information from a disinterested source. Rosa described her experience:

What is FAFSA, what is this? They said, “come tomorrow at 8 o'clock in the morning. They're going to be open from 8.” So I went and the line was out the door and I'm pregnant. I'm like, what do I do? I have to pee every 5 minutes. You get out of line, they don't want to hold your spot so you get back in line. Finally, I got in the room. It's hot. I'm bothered. I haven't ate, I'm cranky, and I just walk up. We had to sign in so I back up to the desk where the lady had the sheet and I'm like, “I've been here since 8 o'clock in the morning and I just want to know what's FAFSA, can I do it on my own?” She's like, “well, you're just gonna have to wait, they're gonna help you.”

The embodiment of Rosa's pregnant body further complicates her experience trying to get information about financial aid while constantly needing to use the restroom, and no other student would save her spot in the line. Rosa was near her “breaking point” and “stormed out of there” a few hours later, without any help or direction. Instead, Rosa was enticed to enroll at Heald College in Oakland, California, after “seeing all these commercials, get in, get out, get ahead, you know.” In her mind, Rosa had it all figured out. By the time her daughter turned two she would have a career. She stated: “(my daughter) won't even know that I was broke you know, she won't even know I went to school.”

Rosa was not considering enrolling at Heald. She went to Heald only to get information about financial aid. But in less than two hours Rosa left Heald college with her financial aid application completed and a schedule of her classes. Rosa earned an A.A. in Applied Science from Heald college after three years. However, when she left Heald her debt was over \$30,000 and she had no job. Her first student loan statement was more than her car payment, \$300. Rosa struggled financially despite her degree—or perhaps, because of it. She moved four times in one year and eventually moved in to live with her parents. But, she held on to a dream

The Professional Strand

The professional strand highlights how student mothers negotiate the conflicts between career choices and parenting responsibilities, selecting education that will lead to careers that align with their priorities and responsibilities as mothers. Some had to negotiate “big” dreams with more realistic professional careers. For example, the career paths Krystal, Anayeli, and Rosa chose will allow them to achieve their personal academic goals, provide for their family while still allowing them to raise their ch

Mothering pushed Anayeli to negotiate her “dreams” with more “practical” goals and aspirations. When she returned to Pacific Coast Community College in the Fall of 2014 she discovered that she was “really good” at math and enjoyed taking math courses. She recognized the perks of teaching—getting the summers off and being able to spend more time with her children. Anayeli feels she had to compromise her professional aspirations, choosing to become a math teacher because the job aligns with the demands of motherhood.

In 2014, after focusing on her responsibilities as a mother, Rosa gave Pacific Coast Community College another try. She enrolled full time and has been matriculated every semester since. She will graduate with an Associate in Arts in Sociology for Transfer (A.A.T.) and will attend UC Berkeley in the fall 2017. Rosa’s academic goal is to earn a Master’s degree in Counseling so she can be a guidance counselor for high school and college students. That career choice also fits well with the demands of motherhood.

The professional strand builds on the aforementioned two strands, the mother and student *trenza*. The career paths Krystal, Anayeli, and Rosa have chosen will allow them to achieve their personal academic goals, provide for their family, and have the necessary flexibility to raise their children.

Conclusion

Latina community college students mothers are often invisible on college campuses and in the education literature. In order to improve their chances for success, we must understand the lived experiences of Latina community college student mothers, and perhaps student parents overall. We must acknowledge and validate their experiences and identities using

(Delgado Bernal, 2002). Student mothers face circumstances similar to those of all non-traditional students, but because they are parents, their challenges magnify exponentially, particularly on hostile, unwelcoming college campuses. Their experiences and identities play a critical role in who they are as mothers today, where they are located academically, and whom they hope to become professionally and personally. The stories shared in this article are a testament not only to their persistence, but also their resiliency and *ganas* to obtain a post-secondary education in order to be role models for their children.

We urge others to recognize that the educational pipeline for Latina student mothers, often begins at the community college. This is critical because the literature on the Latinx pipeline does not address the detours community college student mothers must make after they enter and return later. We know that out of 100 students, 17 go to the community college and only one transfers to a four-year university (Pérez Huber et al., 2015; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). We question who those 17 students are and to what extent they include student mothers. We also wonder who is the one student who transfers to a four-year university.

The affirmation of Latina community college student mother *trenzas de identidades* warrants c

understand this group and respond with programs and services to meet their needs. The National Center for Student Parent Programs (2017) launched the family friendly campus toolkit to enable colleges and universities to begin collecting relevant data. By creating a campus culture that is receptive and welcoming, we can increase student parent retention rates. We call upon administrators, faculty, and staff in other community colleges to join in these efforts.

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