



Educator Brief

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IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE

Supporting Latine Immigrant-Origin Students and Families

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Latine immigrant-origin students are a rapidly growing presence in schools across the United States, with over half of all students with at least one immigrant parent being of Latine immigrant origin.¹ These students bring a wealth of cultural and linguistic assets to the classroom. However, they also face unique challenges related to their family's immigration experiences, such as migration-related trauma, acculturative stress, xenophobia, and navigation of unfamiliar educational systems.² Educators play a critical role in recognizing and addressing the specific needs of Latine immigrant-origin students in order to ensure their academic success and overall well-being.



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A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGY - LATINE

This brief uses the term Latine throughout, referring to individuals of Latin American origin(s). Over the years, terminology has evolved, with “Hispanic” initially emerging in the 1980s to describe those of Spanish-speaking heritage. However, it has become associated with Spain, leading to the adoption of “Latino” for those of Latin American origins. The gendered nature of “Latino” prompted alternatives like Latino/a, Latin@, and Latinx, although these are terms primarily used in academic contexts and less so in communities. Here, we use “Latine” as a gender-neutral term, widely used across the Americas and easily pronounced in conversation. “Latines” is the plural form. This term reflects a commitment to inclusivity and respect for the diverse identities within the Latine community. Notably, Latine is a pan/umbrella term. In everyday practice, many Latines select hyphenated identities specific to countries of initial familial origin (e.g., Mexican-American; Dominican-American; Cuban-America; Salvadoran-American, etc.)

By understanding the complex interplay of cultural identity, family dynamics, and sociopolitical contexts that shape these students’ lives, schools can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments that celebrate diversity and promote the strengths of all students.

In this Immigration Initiative at Harvard Educator Brief, we provide an overview of Latine immigrant students and their families, addressing their challenges while highlighting their diversity, cultural richness, and resilience. We offer guidelines for culturally responsive practices that empower educators to effectively support and recognize these students and their families. This brief aims to provide educators with insights and strategies to serve Latine immigrant-origin students and their families better.



WHO ARE LATINES?

Latine families are highly diverse, originating from over 20 different countries and encompassing a myriad of Indigenous, African, European, Asian, and mestizaje backgrounds.³ Some are refugees escaping political, religious, and social strife or environmental catastrophes.⁴ Others are motivated by the promise of better jobs, while others view their migrations as an opportunity to provide better education for their children.⁵ Some speak only English, others only Spanish, others speak Indigenous languages, and still others code-switch between languages (with varying proficiencies). Many have the privilege of documentation, while others are unauthorized and/or live in mixed-status families.^{6, 7} Some join well-established communities with robust social supports, others settle in under-resourced high-poverty neighborhoods, yet others move from one migrant setting to another.⁸ Some come from educated, professional backgrounds, while others are not literate. Some receive excellent schooling in their countries of origin, while others leave educational systems that are in shambles.

The experiences of Latine immigrant families vary considerably depending upon their constellation of resources and

the social contexts they enter.^{9, 10, 11}

CHALLENGES FACED BY LATINE IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS

Latine students in K-12 schools encounter a complex web of challenges that significantly impact their educational experiences and overall well-being. These challenges stem from both distal contextual factors and more proximal familial issues.

Educators working with Latine students should be aware of these multifaceted challenges to provide their students with appropriate support. By understanding the complex interplay of pre-migratory challenges, immigration policies and societal attitudes, family dynamics, and specific educational challenges, schools can better create inclusive environments that foster Latine students’ resilience and academic success.

Pre-Migratory Challenges

Before Latine families even begin their journey to the United States, they often face significant challenges in their countries of origin that compel them to migrate. These pre-migratory challenges can impact families and children, shaping their experiences and adaptation processes in the new country.

These pre-migratory challenges often intersect and compound one another, creating complex situations that drive families to make the difficult decision to leave their homes. Understanding these root causes is crucial for educators and policymakers to provide appropriate support and develop empathy for Latine immigrant students and their families.

- **Violence and Insecurity.** Many Latine immigrants, particularly those from Central America, flee their home countries due to pervasive violence and insecurity. Gang violence, drug trafficking, and political instability create untenable living conditions that force families to seek safety elsewhere.
- **Economic Hardship.** Extreme poverty and lack of economic opportunities are significant push factors for migration. In many Latin American countries, limited access to education, healthcare, and stable employment drives families to seek better prospects abroad.
- **Environmental Disasters.** Climate change and environmental disasters have increasingly become drivers of migration from Latin America. Hurricanes, droughts, and other extreme weather events can devastate communities, destroying livelihoods and forcing displacement. For example, the impacts of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 contributed to increased migration from Honduras and Guatemala.¹²
- **Political Persecution.** In some cases, Latine immigrants flee political persecution or human rights abuses in their home countries. Activists, journalists, and members of marginalized groups may face threats to their safety and freedom, compelling them to seek asylum in the United States.¹³

Post-Migratory Challenges in the New Setting

Upon arriving in the United States, Latine families and their children often



encounter a new set of challenges that can significantly impact their adaptation and integration processes. These challenges, ranging from navigating complex immigration policies to facing social exclusion and economic instability, can have profound effects on the educational experiences and overall well-being of Latine students. Understanding these post-migration challenges is crucial for educators, policymakers, and community leaders to develop effective support systems and create inclusive environments that foster the success of Latine immigrant students.

- **Immigration Policies and Social Exclusion.** Recent shifts in immigration policies have created a hostile environment for many Latine families. The enforcement of restrictive policies has led to increased border control, family separations, and threats to programs like DACA. These changes have profound implications for Latine students, affecting their family unity, economic stability, and mental health.¹⁴
- **Xenophobia and Racism.** Latine students often face toxic social attitudes of exclusion, xenophobia, and racism. This “othering” can lead to discrimination and stigmatization, negatively impacting students’

sense of belonging and academic engagement.¹⁵

- **Economic Instability.** Many Latine families work in vulnerable, low-wage sectors, which restrictive immigration policies can exacerbate. This economic instability can lead to food and housing insecurities, negatively affecting students’ academic and behavioral development.¹⁶

Familial Challenges

- **Family Separations.** Latine students may experience extended periods of parent-child separation due to immigration processes or deportations. These separations can disrupt familial attachments, interrupt schooling, and cause significant emotional distress.¹⁷
- **Acculturative Stress.** As families navigate new cultural norms, different rates of acculturation between children and parents can lead to intergenerational tensions. This stress can be particularly acute for newcomer students.¹⁸
- **Mixed-Status Families.** Many Latine students live in mixed-status families, where at least one parent is undocumented. This situation can create a constant fear of family separation and reluctance to



access essential services, including educational resources.^{19, 20}

Educational Challenges²¹

- **Language Barriers.** While not all Latine students are English learners, those who are may face additional challenges in accessing the curriculum and engaging fully in school activities.
- **Academic Disruptions.** Family separations, economic instability, and the stress of uncertain immigration status can lead to frequent school changes or absences, impacting academic continuity and achievement.
- **Social-Emotional Well-being.** The cumulative effect of these challenges can significantly impact students' mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and trauma responses that can interfere with learning.

RESILIENCES OF LATINE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Despite the substantial challenges that Latine immigrant families often face in the United States, they demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. They draw upon a well of individual, familial, cultural, and community

strengths that collectively protect against the hardships associated with migration and help families thrive in the face of adversity.^{22, 23}

Personal Attributes

Latine immigrant youth exhibit crucial personal attributes that provide a strong foundation for resilience, including:

- Social competence
- Problem-solving skills
- Sense of purpose and future

Family Strengths and Cultural Assets

Manifestations of Latine culture, including holding to salient values, can serve to mitigate the challenges of migration and acculturation stressors. Maintaining these cultural touchstones provides both stability and strength to Latine families across generations. Some of these fundamental cultural values that have been identified include:

- **Familial cohesion and connectedness:** Strong emotional bonds and support within the family

- **Collectivism:** Prioritizing family needs over individual needs
- **Respeto:** Respect for elders and authority figures
- **Educación:** Emphasis on moral and social education, beyond just academics

Community Supports

Latine immigrants often form robust community networks and support systems in their new environments. This community-level resilience further bolsters Latine immigrant families' ability to overcome challenges and thrive. These social connections serve to:

- Provide practical assistance and advice
- Offer emotional support and encouragement
- Foster a sense of belonging and solidarity

In short, while Latine immigrant students and families face significant adversities, they also possess a powerful combination of personal, familial, cultural, and community resiliencies. These protective factors often work in concert to promote positive adaptation and educational success.

Tara Yosso's framework of "Community Cultural Wealth" aptly delineates the knowledge, values, and social capital transmitted across Latine families, providing a practical asset-based framework. Yosso's model expands upon Bourdieu's social capital theory, specifying forms of capital that elevate aspects of communities of color that have traditionally been overlooked.²⁴

These forms of capital shed light on specific ways in which Latine youth draw upon their families, communities, and "cultural wealth" as resiliencies that enable them to navigate and overcome



challenges and leverage their experiences for improved future functioning.

Aspirational capital refers to how ambitions and hope are kindled and sustained in the face of low societal expectations and oppressive circumstances. Latine students report being motivated to honor their parents' sacrifices, make their families proud, and give back to their families and communities.²⁵

²⁶ These aspirations, instilled in the family, can provide hope and *ganas* - the drive to overcome and achieve despite adversity. As Easley et al.²⁷ note, *ganas* transform challenges into motivation, fueling persistence and a refusal to accept failure.

- **Linguistic Capital** refers to the skills obtained through linguistic and communication experiences, including multilingual practices, storytelling traditions, and language brokering - the regular informal acts of translating that children do on behalf of immigrant family members.²⁸ Evidence suggests cognitive advantages to multilingual exposure and educational practices, though the results are complex and somewhat mixed.²⁹ There are undoubtedly affective, family relations, and

social connection advantages to maintaining home language communication skills; language of origin is essential for maintaining clear and deep communication across generations.³⁰ Additionally, bi/multilingualism also plays an important symbolic function in positive racial-ethnic identity formation³¹ and offers clear advantages in the marketplace.³²

- **Familial capital** refers to the "cultural knowledge nurtured through kin,"³³ recognizing both the nuclear family as well as the importance of extended family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, *madrinas*, and *padrinos*) in Latine family systems. This model, sometimes called *familismo*, places the family as the central unit for most Latine people, emphasizing its values of connectedness, loyalty, respect, and interdependence.³⁴ The values that come forth from *familismo* serve as deep sources of support, knowledge, and socialization that work to buffer negative impacts of stressors associated with migration and acculturation.^{35,36}
- **Social Capital** encompasses more extensive community networks beyond the family and the resources and support that they afford. Notably, for immigrant families, these community ties can range from the local (within the immediate neighborhood) to the transnational.³⁷ For immigrants, faith-based spaces often play a particularly central role in integration and socialization by serving as hubs for community and resources.³⁸ Faith-based spaces are essential as immigrant families draw strength from their spirituality and religiosity. Research has shown that immigrant Latine families use faith to cope with a range of immigration stressors since religion offers a

sense of social support, values, and a locus of control.³⁹ Faith also serves as a source of continuity for immigrants as religious practices and related traditions can provide a sense of familiarity and connection to their country of origin.⁴⁰

- **Navigational capital** refers to knowledge shared within the community about navigating social institutions. Latine families, especially the recently arrived, seek trusted guides that can help them to help understand institutional expectations and communicate on their behalf.
- **Resistance capital** is described as the skillful ability to secure rights. Resistant capital may be fostered across generations as knowledge is passed on around societal oppression, or it can be sparked by firsthand witnessing of inequitable practices.^{41,42} Critical consciousness—recognition of inequity—is the precursor to civic engagement and resistance, serving as a catalyst for engaging in community and political activism in response to xenophobic and racist policies and practices. Resistance capital can manifest as a sense of social responsibility as well as forms of civic engagement, providing a further fount of resilience and agency for Latine families.⁴³

SUPPORTING LATINE IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Educators play a vital role in supporting Latine immigrant students and their families. To support these families effectively, we must acknowledge that there is no single Latine family experience due to varying country of origin factors, socio-economic and racial-ethnic backgrounds, as well as the multitude of national, state, and local contexts of reception. Effective practice

requires understanding the social landscape, recognizing specific needs and challenges, and leveraging their individual and familial strengths.⁴⁴

- Learn and stay informed about laws, policies, and current events, both at the national and local level, that could impact students from immigrant backgrounds and their families.
- Reflect on your positionality, which encompasses how your intersecting social identities shape your perspective and influence your work. Consider how your identities, experiences, and implicit biases could impact students.
- Utilize a strengths-based perspective when engaging with Latine immigrant families, recognizing their cultural values and language as assets that contribute to their children's development and educational success.
- Recognize that Latine immigrant parents may engage in their child's education in different ways, often through home-based activities, and avoid misinterpreting this as a lack of interest or involvement.⁴⁶ Broaden the opportunities for family involvement to better address the unique contexts and experiences of Latine immigrant families, accommodating a variety of work hours and recognizing non-traditional family structures/ caretakers.
- Collaborate with local community organizations that serve immigrant/ Latine populations to create a network of support for families, offering additional resources and bridging gaps between home and school.
- Design classroom practices that reflect the cultural values of your students' families. Incorporate



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collectivist values, such as collaboration and mutual support, by grouping students with varying abilities and encouraging them to help one another.⁴⁷

- Ensure that all communication, including newsletters, forms, and event information, is available in the family's preferred language and offer interpretation services during meetings and school events.
- Select classroom materials with positive and nuanced representations of Latine people and immigrants, highlighting their strengths and contributions.
- Create opportunities for students to share their histories, cultures, and experiences year-round, not just during Hispanic Heritage Month or a multicultural day.
- Develop mentorship programs or advisory groups that connect immigrant-origin students with

TO LEARN MORE

- Suarez-Orozco, C., Rendon Garcia, S., & Quintero Davalos, A. (in press). Latine immigrant families: An integrative perspective. In *Growing up Latino/a/x in the Land of Liberty: Drawing on community and culture to face contextual challenges*, Ceballos, R. & Rivas-Drake, D. (Eds.). Oxford Press.
- *Latino Families in Therapy: A Guide to Multicultural Practice* by Celia Jaes Falicov
- *Sin Padres, Ni Papeles: Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Coming of Age in the United States* by Stephanie Canizales
- Educator Brief: Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices for Immigrant-Origin Students by Corinne Hébert, (IIH, February 2024). <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/briefs/#educator-briefs>

supportive peers and adults. These programs can occur through afterschool activities or other structured settings to provide guidance and foster a sense of belonging. These separations can disrupt familial attachments, interrupt schooling, and cause significant emotional distress.

EDUCATOR RESOURCES

Explore the [Re-Imagining Migration](#) website for engaging lessons and resources. Specifically related to the Latine experience, we suggest checking out the following lessons for valuable content:

- A Conversation with Latinos on Race
- PBS LatinoAmerica: Foreigners In Their Own Land
- PBS LatinoAmerica: Empires of Their Dream
- PBS LatinoAmerica: The New Latinos
- PBS LatinoAmerica: Pride and Prejudice
- PBS LatinoAmerica: Peril and Promise
- Somos/We are from Latino/USA



CHILDREN'S BOOKS

These acclaimed books center Latine immigrant experiences with sensitivity, showcasing children's resilience, dreams, and family bonds as they navigate the challenges of making a new home.

- **Islandborn by Junot Díaz, illustrated by Leo Espinosa:** In this lyrical picture book, Lola, an Afro-Caribbean girl who immigrated to the U.S. as a baby, learns about her birth country – “The Island” – by collecting stories and memories from family and friends in her neighborhood. The vibrant illustrations beautifully capture Lola's imagination as she pieces together her cultural roots. [This book is available in Spanish under the name Lola.] See lesson plan: <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/connecting-by-recalling-retelling-family-stories/4hmyHVgq57ki1vSr>
- **Dreamers by Yuyi Morales:** This poignant picture book memoir captures Morales' own experience of immigrating from Mexico to the United States in 1994 with her infant son. It beautifully depicts their journey of starting over in a new land, finding refuge and inspiration at the public library.
- **My Shoes and I: Crossing Three Borders by René Colato Laínez, illustrated by Fabricio Vanden Broeck:** This touching bilingual picture book, based on the author's own experiences, follows a young boy's arduous journey from El Salvador to the United States to reunite with his parents. The story celebrates the boy's determination and the power of family.
- **Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale by Duncan Tonatiuh:** Inspired by true events, this allegorical picture book follows young Pancho Rabbit as he ventures north to find his father, who has traveled far away to find work. The story compassionately reveals the hardships and dangers faced by migrants while celebrating the enduring power of hope and family.
- **Areli Is a Dreamer: A True Story by Areli Morales, a DACA Recipient by Areli Morales, illustrated by Luisa Uribe:** DACA recipient Areli Morales movingly tells her own story of being undocumented and dreaming big dreams in America after moving from Mexico as a child. It sensitively portrays her challenges in adjusting to a new school and language, while recognizing her strength and resilience.



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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

