“Me Cuesta Mucho”: Latina immigrant mothers navigating remote learning and caregiving during COVID-19

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Abstract

Before the pandemic, immigrant mothers from Latin America in the United States typically shouldered the weight of caregiving for children, maintained jobs, and managed transnational care responsibilities. But as COVID-19 erupted across the globe, the combination of gendered roles and a collapsing economy ruptured the already fragile arrangement of childcare and paid labor for Latina immigrant mothers. In this article, I examine how school closures intersected with Latina women’s identities and social positions as immigrant mothers who suddenly confronted job loss, illness, and increased familial responsibilities. I show how Latina immigrant women renegotiated relationships to schooling, becoming teachers overnight in an unfamiliar system. Mothers shifted educational aspirations for their children to prioritize safety, as they managed increased stress and conflict while schools remained remote. I demonstrate how the breakdowns in care infrastructure forced mothers to rethink the elusive balance between paid labor and childcare, especially for those who were undocumented. Throughout, I explore how immigrant women’s intersecting identities left them vulnerable to structural racism and exclusionary immigration policies. Despite the multiple layers of struggle, women continued to support their children’s education and socio-emotional
INTRODUCTION

Long before the word COVID-19 became common household parlance, immigrant mothers from Mexico, Central, and South America living in the U.S. typically were the primary caregivers for children and kin, at home and in children’s schools (Dreby, 2015a; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). These caregiving responsibilities often spanned national borders, as many Latina immigrants in the U.S. have children and extended families in their countries of origin (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022; Dreby, 2015b; Waddoups et al., 2019). At the same time as they engaged in caregiving across borders, Latina immigrant women, pre-pandemic, were disproportionately represented in low-wage, precarious work (Abrego, 2014; Eckstein & Peri, 2018). For instance, women from Mexico and Central America are overrepresented in domestic work, which in turn can contribute to isolation and abuse, as there are rarely formal contracts or protections for workers in these positions (Eckstein & Peri, 2018; Fuller, 2018). To some extent, Latina immigrants who are employed in low-wage, low-status positions face similar struggles to other women, including lack of control over scheduling, limited paid time off, and mistreatment by supervisors who do not value women’s efforts to be present, attentive mothers (Dodson, 2013). Yet undocumented Latina immigrant women without work authorization in the U.S. face additional barriers to adequate employment, including exploitation by employers and limited agency in deciding when and where to work (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2021; Vesely et al., 2019). Across lines of immigration status, Latina immigrant mothers also carry the weight of fear of family separation through immigration enforcement and deportation, which further strains the tightrope between work and home obligations (Dreby, 2015b; Simmons et al., 2020). This was especially true under the Trump administration, when the administration’s chaotic and racist approach to immigration policy targeted Latinx immigrants and intentionally sowed fear by expanding those targeted for deportation from people convicted of a crime to anyone with unauthorized immigration status (Bolter, 2020; Canizales & Vallejo, 2021).

The labor market and childrearing environment for Latina immigrant mothers in the U.S. in early 2020 was complicated and challenging. But as COVID-19, an easily transmissible airborne disease with high rates of hospitalization and mortality, erupted across the globe, the combination of gendered roles and a collapsing economy ruptured the already fragile arrangement of childcare and paid labor for Latina immigrant mothers. With schools and daycares closed—sometimes overnight and rarely with more than a few days notice—and with restaurants and offices where Latina immigrants often find employment in low-pay cooking or cleaning positions shuttered indefinitely in an attempt to prevent transmission, women like the mothers in my study were suddenly without childcare or paid work. First, Latina immigrant women were the most likely of any demographic group to be unemployed at the onset of the pandemic, including in comparison to their co-ethnic, U.S.-born peers as well as in comparison to Latino immigrant men (Capps et al., 2020). Second, Latinx immigrants faced multiple, intersecting dynamics that contributed to rates of increased infection, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19 (Figueroa et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2020). These include lower rates of health insurance, in part fueled by undocumented immigration status, English-dominant healthcare settings, and overcrowded, substandard well-being, even in the face of multiple levels of gendered, racialized inequalities.
housing due to constrained access to well-paying, stable employment (Galletly et al., 2021; Ornelas & Ogedegbe, 2021; Page et al., 2020). Finally, although in the early months of the pandemic schools and daycares across the country closed their doors abruptly, schools in urban areas with higher percentages of families of color were more likely to remain remote, with teaching and learning happening on-line for most of the 2020–2021 school year (Parolin & Lee, 2020).

In response to these conditions, this study captured how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed Latina immigrant mothers’ roles as mothers, providers, and supporters of their children’s educations. Drawing on 87 in-depth interviews with 40 immigrant mothers from Latin America conducted between 2019 and 2021 in Somerville, Massachusetts, a small city in the northeastern United States, in this paper, I ask:

• How did school closures during the pandemic reshape Latina immigrant mothers’ perceptions of their roles in their children’s lives and their decisions about work and caregiving?
• In what ways did Latina immigrant mothers respond to local policies about school closures and re-openings in light of the competing demands of caregiving and economic provision?

This research documents the impacts of the pandemic on women whose Latinx immigrant communities were especially devastated by the twin economic and health crises caused by the novel coronavirus. I examine how school closures intersected with women’s positions as low-income immigrant mothers, leaving them financially stressed and socially isolated. I show how Latina immigrant women renegotiated their relationships to their children’s schooling, while navigating shifting aspirations for their children to prioritize safety. Despite these struggles and a shifting public health terrain, women continued to strive to support their children’s education and learning, aligning with their hopes and goals for migrating to the U.S. The data reveal important strengths of the women and the schools that supported them, as well as significant cracks in policies that exacerbated immigrant families’ precarity during this time. Throughout, I illuminate how Latina immigrant mothers provided care and navigated a shifting public health terrain, even as they faced intersecting forms of structural racism and oppression (Pirtle & Wright, 2021).

**IMMIGRANT MOTHERHOOD AND THE ELUSIVE WORK-FAMILY BALANCE**

For low-income women, like the participants in this study, balancing hourly, often inflexible work and caretaking responsibilities for children and relatives involves difficult trade-offs, leaving them struggling to be the mothers they want to be—and the mothers society expects them to be—while also straining their relationships with supervisors (Dodson, 2013). Working-class and poor mothers’ intensive labor on behalf of their children is not always visible to others, even as women make great personal sacrifices to meet their children’s basic needs and support their educational success (Cuevas, 2019; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Randles, 2021). This can entail creative, strategic responses to procuring necessities, which can serve as a way for mothers to enact their ideals of providing for their children, even when facing economic scarcity (Randles, 2021).

For Latina immigrant mothers, particularly those who are undocumented, restrictive immigration laws further complicate their efforts to fulfill their roles as economic providers and caregivers at home (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2021; Vesely et al., 2019). Since the passage of the Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986 (IRCA), the U.S. has increasingly militarized the U.S.-Mexico border, making circular migration more challenging and creating a long-settled
population of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. By the time of the 2016 presidential election, the “wall” became shorthand for the right-wing support for denying entry to racialized migrants from Mexico and Central America (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021). A decade later, in 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act was passed, which created arduous barriers for immigrants who wanted to regularize their immigration status and excluded even lawfully present immigrants from most public benefits and resources, exacerbating false public perceptions that immigrants drained resources from U.S. citizens (Kerwin, 2018). Subsequently, the increase in deportations under President Barack Obama, followed by the incendiary, racist discourse of President Donald Trump, and his administration’s expansion of deportations to include all undocumented immigrants, rather than those convicted of crimes, deepened the fear and anxiety experienced by immigrant families across the United States (Simmons et al., 2020; Valdivia, 2019). These laws are both rooted in and contribute to racist beliefs about who is “illegal,” or racialized illegality, and these anti-Latinx sentiments were a driving factor in Trump’s rise to power (Menjívar, 2021). Racialized illegality, and the immigration laws that uphold it, profoundly shape immigrant women’s daily decisions and routines about work and family and were a critical part of the context they navigated alongside the onset of the pandemic.

In part because of these anti-immigrant policies, Latina immigrant mothers are often employed in physically demanding, low-wage work, including cleaning, manufacturing, and caring for other children (Eckstein & Peri, 2018). Because Latina immigrants are more likely to work as domestic workers than their male counterparts, they often have smaller social networks, which in turn can make it harder to find trust-worthy, affordable childcare (Hagan, 1998; Vesely et al., 2019). As they negotiate restrictive policies and communities where their ethno-racial identity marks them as outsiders, Latina immigrant women may withdraw from the public sphere as a means of avoiding enforcement regimes, especially as the Trump administration increased arbitrary immigration raids (Simmons et al., 2020). Even being in co-ethnic communities doesn’t equally provide a sense of protection across statuses. For instance, one study found that the presence of co-ethnics reduces parenting strain for documented Mexican mothers but had the opposite effect for undocumented Mexican mothers (Noah & Landale, 2018).

Immigration policy also shapes the tension between economic and caregiving obligations for Latina immigrant mothers in the U.S. through another mechanism: family separation. Because of shifts in U.S. immigration policy, including re-entry bans for undocumented residents who must return to their country of origin to try to adjust their status, women confront separation from children and extended kin that often stretch out years longer than they had anticipated (Abrego, 2014; Dreby, 2010). Immigrant women across the globe are more likely than men to send regular remittances to family members, in part because their migrations are often motivated by their desire to sustain their families in their countries of origin (Abrego, 2009). These remittances are part of a web of multidirectional, intergenerational carework that Latina immigrant women sustain across borders (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022). When the economy crumbled with the onset of COVID-19, immigrant mothers suddenly found themselves responsible for family members in the U.S. and in their countries of origin. Stay-at-home orders, which required people to stay in their homes except for emergency purposes or to obtain basic needs, closed the restaurants, hotels, and offices where many immigrant women were employed in kitchens or cleaning, leaving many immigrant women trying to navigate these multidirectional care responsibilities without any source of income.

In this article, I extend research about the elusive work-family balance to reveal how low-income Latina immigrant mothers navigated the pressures to provide economically while nurturing and protecting their children during an unprecedented global health crisis. By exploring how extended school closures transformed the context in which women had to negotiate
competing demands, I offer important, unique empirical evidence about a specific moment in time. But this research also holds longer term relevance and implications beyond the pandemic, as it highlights how Latina immigrant mothers flexibly manage shifting social conditions by redefining their own roles, maintaining aspirations for their children’s educations, and responding proactively to school policy and public-health decisions.

**IMMIGRANT MOTHERS’ EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND ADVOCACY FOR THEIR CHILDREN**

Even as they balance precarious work and often insecure immigration statuses, Latinx immigrant parents maintain high levels of educational aspirations for their children (Hagelskamp et al., 2010; Hill & Torres, 2010; Langenkamp, 2019; Lopez, 2001). At times, they encounter educators that are welcoming and supportive of their advocacy, including cultural and linguistic brokers who make transparent the norms and practices of the U.S. education system and schools that genuinely share decision-making power with families (Henderson et al., 2007; Hong, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Often, however, structural obstacles, such as low-wage work and lack of secure immigration status, inhibit immigrant parents’ engagement with their children’s schools (Bean et al., 2015; Carreon et al., 2006; Valdés, 1996). In addition, cultural factors, like expectations about English use, negative stereotypes about low-income families, and differing norms about parents’ roles in schools, make it challenging for Latina immigrant mothers to navigate the landscape of U.S. public schools (Durand, 2018; Gaetano, 2007; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Finally, undocumented status has become an even more salient challenge to immigrant parents’ school involvement, as the Trump administration in particular widened the grounds for deportation and intentionally stoked fear among immigrant families (Ee & Gándara, 2019; Yoshikawa, 2019). Holding onto high aspirations for their children’s education becomes one critical way immigrant women engage with their children’s schooling, even when this commitment and advocacy may not be visible to English-speaking educators with little experience working with immigrant families.

Despite these structural and cultural barriers, Latina immigrant mothers nevertheless strive for high levels of engagement with their children’s schools, motivated in part through the belief that ensuring quality education is a central aspect of motherhood (Oliveira, 2018). Support for children’s schooling typically falls along a continuum, with some immigrant parents emphasizing at-home encouragement, others engaging directly with the schools, and still others working towards eradicating broader structural inequities (Carreon et al., 2006; Cuevas, 2019; Auerbach, 2007; Terriquez, 2011). Some Latina immigrant mothers use their aspirations as motivation for sustained advocacy, such as designing and organizing for a bilingual school or protesting school closures that disproportionately impact their children (Dyrness, 2011; Manzo & Deeb-Sossa, 2018). Beyond this public involvement, immigrant mothers sacrifice their own well-being to ensure their children’s educational success as they strive to make real on the promise of building a better life in the United States (Cuevas, 2019). The research I present in this paper extends our understanding of immigrant women’s aspirations and advocacy for their children by documenting how a major socio-economic and health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic—rearranged women’s aspirations and decisions about their children’s schooling.

As the pandemic unfolded, Latina immigrant mothers, like so many parents worldwide, had to negotiate entirely new relationships to schools. In the early days of the pandemic, the vast majority of schools across the country were closed for in-person learning. There was tremendous variation in how schools operated between and even within districts; affluent communities could
rely on students’ and parents’ access to high-speed internet, digital fluency, and personal devices to make lessons and materials available on various virtual platforms (Haderlein et al., 2021). In low-income families, who in the U.S. are disproportionately Black and Latinx because of structural racism, parents were less likely to be able to work from home and had inequitable access to broadband internet and personal computing devices, limiting their ability to support and supervise homework assignments or help children log-in to virtual class meetings (Haderlein et al., 2021; Oster, 2021). In-person relationships, often so important to sustaining positive, reciprocal connections between home and school (Hong, 2019), shifted to the virtual space overnight. The “digital divide,” referring to the unequal distribution of access to technology and high-speed internet, was suddenly a defining feature of Latina immigrant mothers’ ability to access schooling for their children (Falicov et al., 2020). Given these unprecedented transformations in schooling, my findings examine the barriers to engagement that my participants faced as well as opportunities for new, productive learning and relationships that emerged as they managed nearly a year of remote schooling.

CONCEPTUALIZING LATINA IMMIGRANT MOTHERS’ AGENCY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

As the introduction to this issue notes, the pandemic has, in many respects, reinscribed traditional, patriarchal divides of household labor (Dinella & Fulcher, 2022). In the United States, women across racial and economic lines, were far more likely to carry the burden of caring for children, even when both parents worked full-time from home, reflecting powerful assumptions about the importance of intensive mothering (Calarco et al., 2021; Etowa & Hyman, 2021; Lutz, Lee & Bokayev, 2022). While migration upends some gender norms, Latina immigrant women, like women across cultural and ethnic differences, often operate in relational contexts where adherence to dominant beliefs about women’s roles are upheld (Boehm, 2012; Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013). And yet, even within these traditional roles, Latina immigrant mothers exert agency in their relationships, childrearing, community-building, and activism, providing care for each other and their children and families across borders (Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2018; Bickham Mendez, 2020). Conceptualizing Latina immigrant women’s pandemic carework through an explicit focus on their power as mothers serves to reinforce how their intersectional identities are important socio-emotional resources, even in times of crisis (Bruhn, 2022; Coleman-King, Brown, Haynes-Thoby & Dowie-Chin, 2022). Throughout this paper, I show how school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the tensions between women’s efforts to balance economic and caregiving labor while maintaining their aspirations for their children’s educations and futures. I demonstrate how women’s intersectional identities as mothers, immigrants, and multilingual speakers influence their decision-making and their priorities as they confront job loss, a global health crisis, and a radically different form of school.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To reiterate, the following questions motivated and guided this study:

• How did school closures during the pandemic reshape Latina immigrant mothers’ perceptions of their roles in their children’s lives and their decisions about work and caregiving?
**TABLE 1** Demographic Data of Immigrant Mothers

| Nation of Origin of Mothers | Number | Years in U.S. at Time of 1st Interview | Number |
|-----------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|--------|
| El Salvador                 | 22     | Less than 1 year                      | 6      |
| Brazil                      | 6      | 1-4 years (post-2016 election)        | 6      |
| Guatemala                   | 5      | 5-10 years                            | 8      |
| Peru                        | 3      | 10+ years                             | 20     |
| Colombia                    | 2      |                                       |        |

| Mexico                      | 1      | Undocumented                          | 21     |
| Honduras                    | 1      | Legal Permanent Resident              | 6      |
| **N = 40**                  |        | Visa or temporary legal status        | 7      |
|                             |        | U.S. Citizen                          | 6      |

• In what ways did Latina immigrant mothers respond to local policies about school closures and re-openings in light of the competing demands of caregiving and economic provision?

**METHODS**

The data for this paper stem from a larger ethnographic project in Somerville, Massachusetts that was on-going at the time of the pandemic’s onset in March 2020 and included 87 interviews with 40 mothers who had migrated as adults to the U.S. from countries in Latin America (see Table 1). Somerville is the most densely populated city in New England, with approximately 81,000 residents, about 20% of whom are foreign-born (U.S. Census Data). It has long been a destination for immigrants, and schools were accustomed to working with immigrant families prior to the pandemic. I began collecting data in 2018 and had conducted over eighteen months of in-person participant observations and interviews at schools, district offices, and city programs when a stay-at-home order, which required everyone except essential workers to stay home except to obtain basic needs, was issued by local and state officials. Prior to the start of the pandemic, I had built relationships with participants, which typically involved multiple informal conversations at schools, parent English classes, and other programs across the city. As a white, U.S.-born citizen and a native English speaker, my identities varied from my participants in significant ways. However, we also shared important and relevant characteristics, especially that we were all mothers of school-aged children in the same city. In initial interviews, I asked women first about their experiences with schools before turning to their migration trajectories and perspectives on local and national immigration policies, and sought to ask open-ended questions that did not pressure women to revisit traumatizing aspects of their migration histories.

Having established relationships, when the pandemic shuttered schools, I pivoted my research design to conduct additional interviews with study participants to understand how women were experiencing the pandemic. These interviews, averaging about 50 minutes, were conducted on the phone with 36 out of 40 original participants; most interviews were conducted between April and August 2020, but several women were interviewed in March 2021. I used an interview
protocol to gather data on job loss, coping strategies, illness, remote schooling, sources of support, and children’s responses to the pandemic. A subset of 11 mothers were interviewed again in April 2021 about their perspectives on school re-opening. I used two criteria for these final interviews: 1) I chose participants who were representative of the sample as a whole and 2) I focused on women who had been interviewed earlier during school closures and had not discussed re-opening after extended remote schooling had occurred. Through all these interviews, I reached saturation, or the point at which each additional interview does not reveal new trends (Small, 2009).

To maintain the privacy of my participants, I used a process of verbal informed consent that did not require a signature. I shared an information sheet explaining the goals of my research, what participation entailed, their right to stop the interview or decline to answer any questions, and the various outlets for the research, including presentations, articles and/or books. I typically did not inquire directly about immigration status, although women all eventually shared their statuses in the course of our interviews, and frequently referenced their status as they explained decisions about work and family. I use pseudonyms for all participants. I offered mothers the choice to speak in English or Spanish for our conversations; four mothers opted to be interviewed in English and thirty-six women chose to be interviewed in Spanish.

Initial data analysis was conducted using the qualitative data software programs Atlas.ti. I used flexible coding (Deterding & Waters, 2018), wherein I first established codes representing broad categories discussed during the COVID-19 interviews, such as “Remote Learning” and “Fear of Infection.” I then coded for additional themes and findings within broader categories, developing analytic codes such as “managing uncertainty and overall stress,” “concerns about ability to support children’s learning,” and “children’s increased stress.” Throughout this process, I wrote thematic memos to develop and describe the trends in the data. Additionally, after repeated analysis of interview transcripts and field notes, I wrote case summaries for each mother to describe their life histories and responses to the pandemic. Finally, I analyzed the data for common patterns, as well as notable discrepancies, based on nation of origin, time in the U.S., and immigration status. My findings reflect this in-depth, longitudinal process of analysis.

FINDINGS

To situate my findings, it is important to understand the timeline of decision-making about school closures and re-opening in the district, especially as there was extraordinary variation in families’ options about schooling across the nation and even within metropolitan regions. In Somerville, Massachusetts, an email from the superintendent on March 11, 2020, announced that schools would be closed for two days. However, like many schools nationwide, children did not return to in-person learning for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year. During this time, instruction in Somerville varied widely. There was little district-wide guidance and many teachers were unequipped to transition to online instruction and were themselves managing lack of childcare. It wasn’t until late July that the district announced schools would begin remotely in late September. By the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, the district had issued guidelines for teachers about remote learning and teachers had participated in training on virtual teaching and learning. Students received a certain number of hours of in-person, synchronous instruction daily, depending on grade level. Still, the mothers in my study reported wide variation in experiences. While many districts returned to in-person instruction throughout the fall and winter of 2020–2021, Somerville remained fully remote until March, with most students returning to in-person learning in late April 2021, after the Massachusetts governor issued a policy mandating that schools re-open.
Changes in roles as mothers

While women across the country suddenly found themselves managing children’s learning at home when schools shuttered in March 2020, the mothers in my study confronted particular barriers as immigrants. As women who had migrated as adults, only five were comfortable speaking English, and none had participated in U.S. schools. Angela, for instance, was a mother of three girls who migrated from El Salvador in 2017. Despite her secure immigration status as a permanent resident who would eventually be eligible to apply for citizenship, she struggled with her new role as a teacher to her daughters. She explained, “It’s not the same having classes online, because if they are unsure, they say to me, “I don’t understand this,” and to not be able to ask the teacher or ask for help so they can resolve the situation. This has been one of the complications. I said, ‘How am I going to help?’” Before the pandemic, Angela had trusted the schools and believed they were teaching her daughters well while she held a stable job cleaning at a local hotel. She was laid off when the pandemic brought travel to a halt. Now she was isolated at home with her daughters, trying to shepherd them through the challenges of remote learning so she could make good on her decision to migrate “for my daughters, for a better future for them,” even though she wasn’t earning any income and worried about providing for them financially. Like Angela, but unlike the twenty-one undocumented mothers, Marta had work authorization and a Social Security number, but this did not protect her from losing work when the pandemic began. As she turned her attention to her daughter’s education and well-being, she felt frustrated and incompetent.

Above all, because you know, my English isn’t that good and the school… they only send the work schedule two times a week… The rest of the time it’s me who is there, who has to be with her. It’s difficult… in the house, I’m not a teacher, I’m not prepared for this. The little that I know from when I studied in my country, I know a little, but the language is different, my English isn’t as good and [my daughter’s] Spanish isn’t that good either. She doesn’t know how to translate, or I sometimes translate. It’s been complicated.

For Angela and Marta, the pandemic shifted their roles as mothers from providers to teachers, a transition neither woman was eager to make, as they both highly valued their role as economic providers in their families. The closing of schools engendered feelings of inadequacy as informal teachers with no training and formal education obtained in a different language and a different country. Importantly, these experiences were echoed across my sample, regardless of women’s immigration statuses, suggesting that changes in women’s relationships with schools were motivated as much by their identities as immigrants and speakers of other languages than by their specific immigration status.

For every participant, the uncertainties generated by the pandemic brought about shifts in motherhood. Yet patterns emerged based on employment status prior to the onset of the pandemic. Angela and Marta, for example, had both worked full time prior to March 2020, and so one of the major shifts in motherhood for them entailed the involuntary transition from provider to teacher. About two-thirds of the women had worked outside the home before the pandemic, and all but two experienced significant unemployment or underemployment throughout the school closure period; these mothers echoed the frustration and sense of loss at being unable to provide economically that Angela and Marta expressed. In contrast, Iris, a Guatemalan mother with a green card and Lilian, an undocumented mother who had come from El Salvador in 2008, had
both been full-time caregivers prior to the pandemic, along with ten other mothers who had not been engaged in wage labor. Iris had two children under six at the time of our first interview and knew that her wages would be directed fully toward the costs of daycare if she worked while Lilian remained unemployed largely because of her undocumented status. Both women described shifts in the emotional labor and intensity of their caregiving as stay-at-home orders and school closures upended their worlds. Lilian explained the changes in her school-aged children that transformed her mothering:

Maybe the biggest challenge, I think for me is that I’m the one who is with the children. They have entered into an anxiety, so to speak, because their lives have totally changed. It affects us adults, but I think it affects the kids more. To know that they have to be in the house, that they can’t leave, that they can’t have a normal life like before…I think it has made them have a more difficult character. They get angry quickly. I have noted this, among other things.

As her children’s anxiety escalated in the early days of the pandemic, Lilian had no one else to turn to, as she was, in her words, “the one who is with the children.” In this way, her gendered responsibilities intensified as she strove to mother children who were anxious and stressed.

Iris, despite the relative security of her lawful permanent residency, expressed a similar sentiment when I asked her how she was managing as a mother.

Desperate because they are desperate. At the least, you’re used to going out to the park to distract yourself, to take the children out so they can burn off their energies there. With all this you can’t do that…they despair from being shut in. If a grown person desairs, how much more a child? It was really hard to keep them in the house and for them to be able to be ok there.

Iris’ comments focus more on her children’s physical energy, aligning with their developmental stages. But as mothers who had focused on childrearing instead of paid labor, they found their relationships with their children to be increasingly difficult to navigate during the early phases of the pandemic, especially when parks and playgrounds were closed in Somerville until the end of June 2020.

Of course, managing the increased conflict at home was not unique to Latina immigrant mothers. Mothers, across race, nation of origin, and levels of educational attainment, reported increased time on childcare and more sibling conflict (Pett et al., 2021). But the Latina immigrant mothers in this research were mothering in a context where multiple aspects of their identity intersected to produce increased exposure to COVID-19 and to poor health outcomes upon diagnosis. Their families’ position at the lower rungs of the economic tier meant that if work was available, it was likely to be impossible to be performed at home. Although none of the women in my study reported direct fear of going to a hospital, several shared that people they knew who feared being turned away by a hospital because their undocumented status made it complicated to obtain insurance, did not seek medical care when they contracted COVID-19, and ultimately died of the disease. In addition, nineteen of my participants shared apartments with others beyond their immediate family, further increasing their risk of exposure, which led many to be extremely cautious about leaving their homes as a way to manage the other risks over which they had little control. These racialized and gendered intersectional aspects of their identity exposed them to structural racism, shaping the transformation of their roles as mothers throughout the pandemic.
Despite these stressors, a small number of mothers, mostly those who had been employed outside the home pre-pandemic, reported enjoying the time with their children, at least in the early months of the pandemic. Ada, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of four, had previously worked at a commercial laundry five to six days a week, and often had only an hour or two with her children after school before she had to leave for her shift. When we spoke on the phone in June 2020, she explained, “I think that the time we sometimes lose not being with them, now we’ve gotten it back...All the time. Now [my daughter] can’t say, ‘My mommy isn’t with me, I wish my mommy was with me.’ Now I say, ‘Now I’ve spent a lot of time with all of you!’” At this, we both burst into shared laughter. While Ada would have liked a less extreme way to catch up on time with her family, given that many Latina immigrants work in low-wage positions with limited flexibility, she was not alone in expressing positive feelings about the unexpected time with children, even as they acknowledged high levels of stress and uncertainty.

Whether mothers struggled with the transition from wage earner to informal teacher or agonized over their children’s increased anxiety or found joy in the forced togetherness, the expectation was that they would navigate these shifts in mothering largely on their own (Dinella, Evans, & Levinson, 2022). Schools sought to step into the void provided by other governmental systems; one school, attended by many of the mothers in my study, successfully contacted each family within the first three weeks of the pandemic. Mothers greatly appreciated this outreach. But given the strain on schools to shift to remote learning without training or resources, schools could not compensate for the immense challenges faced by Latina immigrant women. As Lorena, an undocumented El Salvadoran mother of two summarized her new role as teacher and mother, “Me cuesta mucho. It’s really hard for me.”

**Immigration status and breakdowns in care routines**

The Latinx population in the United States suffered the consequences of the shutdown of commerce, services, and schooling in March of 2020 more acutely than most other demographic groups (Capps et al., 2020). While Latina immigrant mothers once relied on schools and after-school infra-structure to support care routines for their children, remote learning meant different requirements needed for everyday care. Because mothers disproportionately manage the logistics and responsibility for arranging childcare, and because the economic shuttering especially affected immigrants who could not perform their jobs at home, when this infrastructure ground to a halt, women were faced with nearly impossible dilemmas. Working meant having to pay for childcare or entrusting children to participate in remote schooling unsupervised. Of the twenty-eight women who worked outside the home before the pandemic, ten had returned to wage labor outside the house by the time of our second interviews, and two more began caring for other children at home to supplant their lost wages. Despite different configurations of care, women expressed a sense of limited options. The breakdowns in care constrained their ability to decide how to manage their various roles as mothers while also navigating the constraints imposed by restrictive immigration policies, especially for undocumented mothers. Given that many schools serving Latinx students are located in urban areas where school closures extended throughout the 2020–2021 academic year (Oster, 2021), these ruptures had long-term ramifications for Latina immigrant mothers.

Just over half the women (21) in my study were undocumented, which left them with little negotiating power at work. Camila, for instance, was an undocumented mother from Guatemala who was pregnant with her second child when the pandemic began. Her hours were cut, and
although she had wanted to work after her baby was born, she couldn’t arrange a schedule that would allow her to supervise her 7-year-old son’s remote learning and was worried a new employer wouldn’t hire her without papers. She remained home, leaving the family scrambling to keep up with expenses. Unable to connect to remote learning with the school-district provided tablet, she engaged her son in activities at home, reading books, painting pictures, and building Legos, and felt proud of these efforts. But as of January 2022, she was still unemployed. Her unauthorized immigration status prohibited receiving any federal support at a time when her status as a pregnant person and a mother required her to care for her children.

In subsequent interviews, Camila, like many other mothers in my study, described one of the long-term impacts of the breakdowns in care: their reliance on savings to pay for basic necessities meant that their bank accounts, with years of accumulated savings that they hoped would assure their children’s future well-being, had been wiped out in a matter of months. Only about one-third of the sample was eligible for federal emergency funds because the CARES Act passed under Trump restricted payments to families where jointly filing couples both had Social Security numbers, so undocumented women and those with undocumented partners were denied any support from federal funds. This was a particularly egregious exclusion because, as many participants pointed out, they and their undocumented partners also worked hard, and often, paid taxes. Flor, one of six U.S. citizens, migrated from El Salvador in the late 1990s and had three U.S.-born children. She left her job when the pandemic began because there was no childcare for her young twins. Despite her citizenship, she remained excluded from the stimulus, and she directed her ire toward Trump.

He approved the stimulus, and I can’t get it, Sarah. Why? Because I am married to a person who does not have his documents, so for this reason they can’t give me the stimulus. I don’t know if other people got it, but they forget that I have worked very hard, and my husband has worked very hard.

Like Flor, Raquel had resigned from her job as a cashier in a local supermarket because there was no one to care for her children when schools closed. Both women had worked part-time prior to the pandemic, and with the breakdowns in care, they opted to give up their work in hopes that caring for their children would enable their spouses to continue to their full-time employment. Raquel too questioned the logic of denying federal benefits to tax-paying individuals, including her and her husband. “I see that there are a lot of immigrants who don’t have papers,” she told me. “But they give them the opportunity to take out an ITIN (Individual Tax Identification Number), they call it, and you declare your taxes. For people like us that declare with this ITIN, I say, ‘Do they give something?’ But no.” Flor and Raquel, despite their access to work authorization, remained in similar straits to her undocumented counterparts, relying on their spouses’ income and their family’s savings to pay for basic costs while they managed childcare.

Mothers across my study struggled to re-arrange already fragile care arrangements. For the twenty-one undocumented mothers plus two citizens married to undocumented men who were ineligible for these initial government funds, the breakdown in care routines jeopardized women’s wage-earning abilities. The sample was comprised of low-income families, except for one mother who worked full-time for the school district. Despite their low wages, because many women had migrated to provide economic security for their families, they had sought to build a financial safety net before the pandemic. Yet when they had to prioritize caregiving because schools were closed indefinitely, the government denied them financial support that would have eased the strain of the disruptions to basic care infrastructure, including schools and daycares.
While these findings point to some similarities across immigration statuses—such as the fact that citizens, undocumented women, and recent asylum applicants all were denied federal funds—undocumented immigration status complicated women’s return to work as the economy began to recover. Blanca, for instance, had four children, and her oldest had serious special needs which made life at home during the pandemic extremely stressful for her and for her two other school-aged daughters (the youngest was an infant). When we spoke in March 2021, shortly before the schools re-opened, she had been navigating the collapse of support systems for a year. “I haven’t found work; it’s been difficult for me. Sometimes I can’t find anyone to care for the baby either, if I could get a job during the day. I’ve thought that maybe in the earlier part of the night…but I haven’t found anything,” she explained. As the conversation drew to a close, she reflected again on her continued unemployment, even at a time when the economy was re-opening. “Most of the jobs, they ask you for good papers. And that’s one of the reasons why you can’t work.” With schools still closed, Blanca’s available working hours were limited, and in combination with the constraints of her unauthorized status, finding employment was next to impossible.

As these data illustrate, as care infrastructure collapsed around them, the Latina immigrant mothers in my study were pushed out of their paid employment with no way to work from home and no one to entrust their children to. Even when they had work authorization or even citizenship, anti-immigrant federal policies shaped their decision-making as they weighed the risks of working, the risks of not-working, and the need to care for children. For these mothers, the pandemic exacerbated a system where obtaining childcare was always viewed as an individual-level problem. This individual approach to a collective social need deepened the specific barriers faced by Latina immigrant women, rooted in racialized immigration policies and a stratified economic system.

School closures and re-openings: balancing physical safety and emotional well-being

When schools shuttered in March 2020, few people could have imagined that most children in Somerville, Massachusetts would not see the inside of a classroom for another 14 months. As I describe above, nearly all women in my study felt stressed as they involuntarily became their children’s teachers overnight, but none suggested that schools should open during the tumultuous early months of the pandemic. Interviews conducted in spring 2020 captured the level of fear mothers felt, especially because, as one mother commented, “Imagine if every member of our family got sick here. Sometimes us Hispanics don’t have a place that we can isolate ourselves. Because of this we all are contagious.” Immigrants’ economic instability meant they often shared close quarters, which heightened women’s fear. Women were well-aware of the high levels of infection among Latinx immigrant communities and were appropriately concerned about basic interpersonal interactions.

By mid- to late- summer 2020, however, divergent opinions began to emerge in the interviews. All mothers interviewed before the district announced the plans to begin remote learning (25 women in total) expressed hesitancy about the efficacy of the schools’ safety protocols, but only six reported they did not plan to send their children to school. Maura, an undocumented El Salvadoran mother of a toddler and seventh-grade boy, explained her two-fold concern about her son’s safety and his academic progress.
The fear that you always have, that the boy could get sick because you never know if people who show up, whether they are contagious and don’t know it or don’t have any symptoms. I don’t know yet if I want them to open but if they have to open, if the children have to go to school...because it is difficult for them to learn too, above all [my son] who is learning the language at a distance.

Maura had come to the U.S. in 2019 and she was concerned about her son’s English language development, as he had struggled during the early months of school closures. Maura undertook the arduous journey north because she wanted her children to have a better future, and her concerns about remote learning were enmeshed with her aspirations as an immigrant.

In contrast, Carolina had been living in the U.S. for over a decade, and had given birth to two out of three of her children in the U.S. All three were already fluent in English by the time schools closed in March 2020; while the interview with Maura took place before the district had announced the plan to stay fully remote, I spoke with Carolina the day after the superintendent communicated the virtual learning plan to families. “Look, Sarah,” she explained. If the schools had decided to start with hybrid, I can’t say, ‘[My sons] are not going to go to school,’ because they have to receive their classes. Because my children can’t miss their school but if it’s here in the house, it’s much better for me in reality.” While Carolina was pleased with the district’s decision to begin in a fully remote mode of instruction, other mothers were not, having hoped that schools would open their doors. As Sonia, a mother of a pre-kindergartener and an infant said, just a few weeks before the district’s announcement, “What worries me is that they aren’t going to open the schools because it isn’t the same when they go to school as when you are here at home teaching them in the house. They learn more in school than at home. I’m waiting for them to open the schools.” In this moment of transition, mothers in my study, like parents across the country, had to weigh their fears about safety with their concerns for their children’s futures. Yet for these women, their roles as immigrants and speakers of other languages besides English meant that the decision carried an additional weight. Many of the immigrant mothers had endured difficult migration journeys and struggled in the U.S. so that they could fulfill the aspirations they held as immigrant mothers for their children to succeed. They knew that these aspirations might remain unfulfilled or postponed because, in a phrase repeated through many interviews, remote learning “no es igual/is not the same.”

After nearly a year of remote learning, the seventeen mothers interviewed in the spring of 2021 all reflected a shift from fear of illness to fear of long-term emotional ramifications if their children remained at home. Silvia, for instance, despite having been detained at the border with her daughters when she arrived in 2017 from El Salvador, had a Social Security number and received federal emergency funds from the first federal CARES Act in 2020. Because of the time she and her spouse had been out of work, they had rented a bedroom of their well-worn apartment to another couple; remote schooling conditions for her three children and the couple’s child were far from ideal, with little dedicated area for schoolwork. By the time the schools began to re-open in March 2021, Silvia felt it was time.

I agree that also we have to get rid of this fear. I think it is something that has terrorized us. I think we have to take away that fear little by little...the truth is, for me it’s good because the kids have been frustrated only being in the house. They say, “I miss studying, I miss going to school.” For me, it’s good because they can de-stress a little because they’ve been stressed only being shut in.
In contrast to Silvia, Karla, an undocumented mother from Guatemala, had lived in Somerville for fifteen years and her children were both born in the U.S. The pandemic had forced her to relocate to a new apartment when she could not pay rent; although an eviction moratorium was in place, because of her undocumented status she was hesitant to challenge her landlord’s pressures to pay the back rents she owed or move. Although she felt teachers had done the best they could during remote learning, she felt her older son needed to return to school: “To me, it’s good, in one way, because he is going to de-stress, because this has affected him so much, it has given him so much anxiety and all this. I think it is going to help him…of course, I’m worried, because you never know what will happen. I hope to God that everything will be alright.” Silvia and Karla’s perspectives reflected the vast majority of the mothers in my study. As vaccines became available to adults and mothers contended with a year of broken care routines, they were ready to send their children back to learn in-person when the schools re-opened their doors again in April 2021. Their worries about their children’s socio-emotional well-being superseded lingering health concerns. And while immigration status influenced their ability to obtain work, emergency funds, or unemployment benefits, it was not a particularly salient aspect of the decision to return to school.

For the three women in the study who chose to keep their children in remote learning, this decision was related to women’s ability to balance paid labor and childrearing within their family system. Flora had fled El Salvador when she began receiving death threats from local gangs and was now supporting her three children as a single mother. Although she was out of work for 2 months early in the pandemic, she returned to work in late June 2020, and during the 2020–2021 school year, found a routine that worked for her family. Her teenage daughter participated in school from their apartment, and every weekday morning, Flora dropped her second-grade daughter off at a neighbor’s apartment, where she completed her lessons online alongside three other children while Flora worked. This arrangement was sustainable, so when the school district began to re-open, Flora decided to keep her children remote, feeling that it was not worth the risk or the transition, given that only eight weeks were left in the school year.

Around the globe, women carried the weight of caregiving responsibilities for children as the care infrastructure provided by schools and daycares evaporated overnight (Dinella & Fulcher, 2022). For the women in this study, however, their responses to school re-opening and their children’s safety and mental health were informed by the ways their immigrant identities shaped their aspirations for their children. Women relied on their own interpretations of how best to balance the various pressures and expectations as they guided their families through the pandemic. Their relationships to remote schooling evolved over time, from initial fear and frustration to acceptance and gratitude for teachers’ efforts during the extended remote schooling of the 2020–2021 year to ambivalence but ultimately relief when schools finally re-opened. They understood both the power and limits of their abilities to care for and teach their children, and when they felt like those limits had been reached, they opted to send their children back to schools, hoping to see their aspirations for the next generation fulfilled.

DISCUSSION

As the articles in this special issue reveal, women across the globe carried the vast majority of the work of managing families and childcare as the pandemic ruptured basic routines and social supports. Based on in-depth interviews over time with 40 women who migrated as adults from Latin American countries to the U.S., this study takes an intersectional lens to examine Latina immigrant women’s decisions as they navigated responsibilities and aspirations as immigrants and
mothers (Dinella, Evans & Levinson, 2022; García, 2017; Pirtle & Wright, 2021). Taken together, my findings reveal three key themes about the barriers Latina immigrant women confronted as they sought to maintain their aspirations for their children during the pandemic. First, because none of the women attended U.S. schools, becoming a teacher overnight in a language they were not fluent in within an unfamiliar system added additional uncertainty and stress. These stressors were amplified by their low-income status, which meant that they often shared small apartments and needed to remain vigilant to protect their children from the contagious disease; this vigilance resulted in high levels of strain on their children which in turn made motherhood more difficult. Second, breakdowns in care routines were complicated by women’s undocumented status. Their decisions about the balance between care at home and economic labor were informed not just by gender roles but by who in the family could collect unemployment, maintain work over the winter, or find buen trabajo without papers. Typically, this was women’s male partners, and because schools in Somerville, Massachusetts were closed for over a year, undocumented mothers struggled to return to work even when they wanted to. Third, women’s perspectives on the public policy decisions regarding school re-openings evolved over time, a dynamic not well-captured in larger quantitative studies. The in-depth interviews conducted for this study illustrate shifting responsibilities as immigrant mothers for maintaining physical safety when their ethno-racial groups had been especially hard-hit by the pandemic to managing concerns over children’s emotional well-being. Eventually, these changes resulted in the vast majority of participants opting for in-person instruction when it became available.

Racialized immigration policy, which specifically impacts Latinx families, and gendered structural racism, which creates intersectional health and economic inequalities, contributed to the complex obstacles Latina immigrant mothers faced as school closures left them with little sustained social support (Menjívar, 2021; Pirtle & Wright, 2021). As the title of this paper suggests, women understood that with limited policy assistance, the pandemic landed on their shoulders. As my participants repeated, again and again, me cuesta mucho; it is really hard for me. And yet my findings also illuminate women’s proactive stances toward the dire circumstances they found themselves in as schools first closed in March 2020. From finding joy in additional time with children to supporting children’s learning through play to using the time to develop Spanish literacy, my participants developed creative responses that drew on their intersectional identities as sources of strength and resilience. In considering possible implications, then, it is essential to design interventions that address the racialized, gendered barriers faced by Latina immigrant mothers throughout the pandemic while centering their agency and aspirations.

Implications

This work has implications for both theory and practice. In the theoretical field, I highlight the roles of Latina immigrant women in the U.S. and call for a visibility of the labor they do at home with their children, alongside their paid labor. I engage with both the social constraints brought about in tandem with the global pandemic and the ways women practiced agency and pro-active decision-making in the home and at work. In doing so, this research advances our understandings of power and agency, even in times of crisis. Through interviews and sustained ethnographic work, I call attention to the different facets of work that immigrant women do to sustain their children’s futures.

In practice this work has implications for educators, teachers, and others working directly with immigrant families, including social workers and community organizers. By demonstrating
how the pandemic’s unequal damage has affected immigrant mothers, I call for schools to take a flexible approach to engaging families as we re-emerge from the pandemic, and to situate mothers as sources of strength and advocacy for their children and in their families. Like other work calling for two-way communication between families and schools (Hong, 2019; Ishimaru et al, 2016), the findings of this study suggest that it is important to use this moment as an opportunity for recalibration. Rather than telling parents how to support their children at home, educators should establish routines to learn from caregivers about how they supported their children’s learning during remote school. This is not a new recommendation per se. But in the wake of a crisis that devastated many low-income immigrant families, learning from families takes on a new urgency as schools strive to respond to the lingering ramifications of the pandemic on young people. Teachers of English learners in particular should consider how to frame the additional opportunities families had to communicate in their home languages during the pandemic as an asset, and to encourage bilingual conversations about academic content at home. Non-instructional staff should similarly build off the strengths families used to navigate the pandemic, while also being conscious of the particular barriers erected by lack of access to legal immigration status, and the kinds of material resources necessary to help families recover physically and economically.

But it is also important to look beyond the work that educators can do on their own. Expanded, subsidized before- and after-school programs are essential to give immigrant mothers the ability to seek employment opportunities as they re-enter the labor market without the burden of cobbling together care from various providers. This is especially critical for undocumented mothers, who may rely on the informal labor market or have limited ability to negotiate flexible schedules that accommodate traditional school hours. Additionally, the allowance made by the federal Food and Nutrition Service to permit school districts to provide free meals to all students through the 2021–2022 school year should be made permanent. This type of policy is particularly important in immigrant communities that have faced exclusion from other federal benefits during the pandemic. Finally, as other research has called for, this work points to the importance of sustainable systems to support the training, hiring, and retention of bilingual educators (Hong, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020).

Yet this research highlights that schools cannot address social, economic, and racial inequality on their own. Universal access to health care could have alleviated the intense pressure mothers felt as individuals to protect their children from harm. Systemic racism and anti-immigrant policies, which combined to produce negative health outcomes and death across Latinx immigrant communities throughout the pandemic, cannot be overcome through mothers’ efforts to shield their children. Like other scholarship that examines undocumented immigrants’ lives, my work with immigrant mothers before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic again demonstrates the necessity of a pathway to citizenship for all undocumented and liminally documented immigrants, but especially for parents (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Enriquez, 2020; Gonzales, 2016). As the economy recovers and hiring expands, access to work authorization and subsequent eligibility for citizenship would enable undocumented immigrant mothers, like most of my sample, to provide for their families, rebuild their savings, and invest in educational opportunities for themselves and their children.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study to consider. First, the sample was recruited before the pandemic. Family composition, such as age of children and whether a mother was partnered,
likely important factors in mothers' carework during the pandemic, were not criteria of recruitment and my results cannot speak systematically to these dimensions of difference. Second, the sample is not representative of Latina immigrants nationwide, as it is comprised of mostly Central American and South American women, whereas nationally, Mexico is the most common nation of origin. Finally, this research is drawn from a broader study intentionally designed to examine how particular geographic and political features of a city contribute to Latina immigrant women's processes of integration. Thus, the sample comes from one city in Massachusetts, a state with high levels of education, health care coverage, and relatively progressive voters. Future studies might reveal different dynamics depending on where women lived during the pandemic, their countries of origin, and their family structures.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I examine how Latina immigrant mothers navigate a failing care infrastructure and intertwined global health and economic crises. Using an intersectional approach highlights how women’s language practices, positions in low-income families, gender roles, and immigration statuses become a part of women’s decision-making and responses to school closures from March 2020 onward. Even as nearly all the women’s children returned to in-person instruction by the spring of 2021, this research hints at long-term ramifications, including the sustained stress immigrant women faced: school closures, lost wages, and increased mental health struggles for their children. Importantly, the immigrant women in this study ultimately opted to trust schools, and if this trust can be maintained, there may be opportunities for powerful new relationships to emerge between immigrant mothers and educators. As we understand the breakdowns in care and the role immigrant mothers played in the educational lives of their children throughout this crisis, communities and policymakers alike may be better positioned to offer services that are better aligned with the needs of Latinx immigrant families in the U.S.

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