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Teachers, School Climate Key to Latino Immigrants' Academic Success

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Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes of Mexican Immigrant Children: The Importance of School Context

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Teachers and schools that value diversity have a big impact on the academic experiences of Latino immigrant children living in predominantly White communities. That's the finding of a new study by researchers at the University of Kentucky. The study appears in a special section of the September/October 2012 issue of *Child Development* on children from immigrant families.

Children who had a teacher who valued diversity felt more positively about their ethnicity than children who had a teacher who felt uncomfortable with diversity, the study found.

"This is important because feeling positively about their ethnicity was associated with children valuing school more, enjoying school more, feeling like they belonged at school more, and getting better grades," according to Christia Spears Brown, associate professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky, who led the study.

Teachers who valued diversity also seemed to establish classroom norms that discouraged peers from teasing others because of their ethnicity. "Although schools can't change their ethnic composition to make immigrant children feel less of a minority, they can show that they support multiculturalism, they can help teachers see the value of diversity, and they can help their students feel positively about their ethnic group," Brown added.

The study looked at more than 200 third and fourth graders, primarily first- and secondgeneration immigrants from Mexico, in 19 U.S. elementary schools. They live in a community that is 81 percent European American and 14 percent African American, with a rapidly growing Latino population. Children were given questionnaires asking their attitudes about their ethnicity, their experiences with discrimination by peers and teachers, and their attitudes about school. The study also collected the students' grades. Teachers completed a questionnaire on their attitudes about diversity, and the school climate was examined for

multiculturalism and ethnic composition.

“Regions with previously small immigrant populations are now seeing rapid demographic changes, meaning that newly arriving children are entering school systems that have been, until recently, almost entirely European American and African American,” Brown noted. “These children face unique challenges to their educational success, challenges that can in part be overcome through supportive teachers and schools.”

This study was funded by the Foundation for Child Development through its Changing Faces of America’s Children – Young Scholars Program.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 83, Issue 5, Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes of Mexican Immigrant Children: The Importance of School Context by Brown, CB, and Chu, H (University of Kentucky). Copyright 2012 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.