

Firstborn Latina Daughters: The Obstacles that Come with Learning from Home

Glenda Valenzuela

Mentor: Dr. Lee Martin
School of Education at UC Davis

Abstract

Firstborn daughters in Latinx households traditionally tend to have more responsibilities than their siblings. Early on, they find themselves taking the role of a third parental figure in their homes due to external factors such as culture, gender dynamics, and pressure from their parents. The aim of this study is to investigate the experience of firstborn daughters in Latinx homes during remote learning. We interviewed girls ages 13-18 who are firstborn Latinx daughters, along with a group of girls in the same age range who are not firstborn Latinx daughters. We then compared the interviews from both groups to analyze the role of culture, gender roles, and birth order in students' academic success during a pandemic, in which students had to attend school from home. We found that the firstborn group had significant additional responsibilities in relation to their siblings, and they found it harder to navigate a new school when transitioning over from one grade school to another. However, both groups struggled equally with accountability, their mental health, adjusting to home as a new learning space, and staying engaged with classes. The findings of this study suggest implications for better understanding the impact of cultural and gendered complexities on firstborn Latina students' as well as a need for support structures during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Introduction

This article analyzed the experiences of firstborn Latinx daughters during the pandemic who had been learning and living from home during the 2020-2021 academic year. I interpreted their experiences through the lens of culture and familial responsibilities. Lastly, I analyzed the educational experiences of Latina students through the lens of resistance in the classroom. When examining these students' experiences I looked at how additional burdens interconnect with their birth order, culture, and gender.

Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused new stressors on the lives of everyone, especially the youth, by disrupting their academics and focus (Styck et al., 2021). Both students and educators had to adjust to the world of remote learning in such a short span of time. When the living and learning environment of students becomes one, some issues will arise. One of the biggest struggles that students have been experiencing is low levels of their social, emotional and academic well-being (Duckworth al., 2021). Families of immigrants are prone to higher case rates for contracting COVID-19 due to language barriers, low income, and a lack of access to health care programs (Quandt al., 2021). Additionally, the disruptions that COVID-19 has caused are not equal: White people are more likely to adapt to the changes that the pandemic has introduced, while Black and Latinx folks are more likely to struggle (Liu, 2021). Additionally, Black and Hispanic households tend to lack internet and devices and face housing instability, marking a clear disadvantage to remote learning (Francis al., 2021).

Gender Roles

In considering the pandemic, gender roles are important to keep in mind since Latinx families are often close knit and dependent on one another for help. Latinx families, like other collectivist cultures, practice *familismo*, they have a strong orientation and commitment towards one's families (Flores, 2021). Because familismo is so important to Latinx cultures, the family is placed above all else, including oneself. Therefore, when a family member is in need of help most Latinx family members are raised to place that individual's needs before their own. Additionally, most firstborn Latinx daughters are prone to higher responsibilities and leadership roles around their homes (Longoria al., 2020). From an early age, most of them take on the role of a third parental figure in order to help their parents. Their responsibilities range from chores around the home, translating important documents, and taking care of their siblings. Even when the oldest child in the house is a male, the firstborn female takes on more responsibilities due to the gender dynamics of these families. These gender dynamics are embedded in the Latinx culture and are how these children have been socialized from a young age where men are expected to be more independent while the women more nurturing (Longoria al., 2020). The men in the family are socialized through the lens of *machismo*, they are taught to continuously prove

one's masculinity and to provide for the family (Ramirez, 2018). In order to prove one's masculinity, the boys might be expected to work from a young age in order to help provide. In addition, the women in the family are socialized through the lens of *marianismo*, where passivity and self-sacrifice is encouraged (Gil & Velazquez, 1996). They are socialized to be the nurturers of the homes so that they can one day take care of their children and be of better service to their husbands. Lastly, Latinx families also often take on an authoritarian parenting style where they have rigid rules around the home and have patriarchal practices (Flores, 2021). However, because of the gender dynamics in these families, the women are held to higher standards with stricter rules than the men.

Resistance in the classroom

Latinx children's view of their position in school is also tied to their role in the home. Researcher Julio Cammarota investigates Latinx students' positioning in schooling and educational experiences through the lens of resistance (Cammarota, 2004). They found that most Latina students demonstrated their resistance by graduating and striving towards academic success in order to achieve generational change. Because they have been brought up in a home where the gender dynamics have taught them that they are below men, they viewed receiving their diploma as a way to achieve status change. Most men, on the contrary, felt that they were being policed and criminalized and therefore responded to this treatment by resisting and cutting class. Latina students find that their culture and socialization motivates them to achieve academic success in order to be able to be at the same status as their men counterparts in their families. Additionally, female children of immigrant parents are also likely to aim towards higher status occupations and reveal this through early educational expectations (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2007).

In sum, prior to the pandemic these girls were able to escape the responsibilities of their homes for 7-8 hours a day; however, their home and school environment became one. These girls have had to learn to prioritize what is most important while attending to their responsibilities outside of their studies. These same girls are also likely to want to strive towards academic success and break generational change since they feel that they are not being treated as equals to their male counterparts. Thus, in this study we investigate how these girls are accommodating to the world

of remote learning and what issues may arise. In addition, did their struggles differ from those of other students, or did firstborn Latinx daughters find themselves struggling more?

Methods: Thematic analysis

Participants

We recruited participants ages 13-18 who were in grades 7 through high school. These students were in one of two groups. The first group of students were firstborn Latinx daughters who were living and learning remotely from home this past year. The rest of the participants were Latinx, non firstborn, within the same age range as the first group who were also living and learning from home during the pandemic. This second group served as the comparative group in order to compare the answers of participants and help contextualize their experiences. Participants could not be the only child of the family since a number of the interview questions related back to their siblings. Thus, since we were primarily interested in the experiences of the firstborn group, we needed to ask questions that related back to the responsibilities of their siblings such as: “Do you have any responsibilities in relation to your siblings?” We sent out a recruitment email to several schools in order to recruit participants as well as reached out to students we knew met the criteria and could be interested in participating. Students were recruited from several different school districts from all around California, most of which were of low income or economically disadvantaged backgrounds who lived in predominantly Latinx communities. Most participants (5) were from Monterey County in central California.

Ultimately, we recruited eight participants, all of whom were female: four firstborn and four non firstborn. Tables 1 and 2 list the participants, their siblings, and their home counties.

Table 1. *Description of firstborn participants who partook in the study. Includes pseudonym, number of siblings and county they live in.*

	<u>Firstborn</u>	
Pseudonym	Number of siblings	County they reside in
Eve	2 younger siblings	Monterey County
Ede	2 younger siblings	Monterey County

Gina	4 younger siblings	Los Angeles County
Sam	2 younger siblings	Monterey County

Table 2. Description of non firstborn participants who partook in the study. Includes pseudonym, number of siblings, birth order, and county they live in.

Pseudonym	<u>Non firstborn</u>	
	Number of siblings	County they reside in
Angie	Youngest child: 2 older siblings	Monterey County
Mary	Middle child: 2 siblings	Monterey County
Adri	Middle child: 3 siblings	Contra Costa County
Iris	Middle child: 2 siblings	Los Angeles County

Interview: procedure

The interview included twenty-eight questions and was sectioned off into two parts, both of which asked them to reflect on the pandemic this past school year (2020-2021). The first part of the interview asked about students' experiences with remote learning and the second asked about their responsibilities around the home (chores, housework, taking care of siblings, etc.). For example, we asked students, "How would you describe the environment at home while learning? Do you feel that your environment affected your performance in your classes?" All interview questions were the same for both groups, however we took on a semi-structured approach depending on the participants' answers where we asked follow up questions if needed. Students were told that they did not need to answer a question if they did not feel like answering or could discontinue the interview at any time. The interviews lasted anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour and were all conducted through a one time phone call. After the interview, students received a \$15 gift card to their emails from our behalf as an appreciation for their time.

Coding

We examine our research question through the method of thematic analysis. After the interviews were conducted, we transcribed them and took note of themes and patterns that were repeated throughout the interviews. We engaged in two rounds of coding. For the first round of coding we engaged in open coding where we took note of what seemed salient to our research question while in the second round of coding, axial coding, we took note of a conclusive list of what was most prevalent. We looked at our data and identified key themes within the interviews such as: struggle with accountability, mental health, home environment, disengagement with learning, siblings responsibilities, and navigating a new school.

Positionality

Given my positionality as a first generation, firstborn, female, and a Latinx college student, this research was very personal to me. I was raised in a household where gender roles were strictly enforced from a young age. One was expected to fulfil the responsibilities of the home while also being expected to excel in their academic studies. This experience brought me to think of all those same girls in my position during the pandemic who could not escape their homes. While remote learning has been difficult for most people, I was interested in examining the experiences of this group of girls specifically.

Results

In this study we found six key themes that helped us make sense of these students' experiences with remote learning: struggle with accountability, mental health, home environment, disengagement with learning, siblings responsibilities, and navigating a new school. The themes were either cross cutting (relating to both groups) or distinctive themes (relating to only one of the two groups). Firstborn Latinx students' experiences differed from those in the non firstborn group in their responsibilities with their siblings and navigating a new school; however, all students struggled with accountability, their mental health, distractions at home and disengagement with learning.

Cross cutting themes:

Struggle with accountability

One common theme throughout the interviews from both groups was that of a lack of accountability. Students found it extremely difficult to hold themselves accountable to do their work since they were not being taught in person. Students reported that the lack of physical presence caused them to feel “lazy” with their work and assignments. When answering to why there was a decrease in her grade, student Ede reported:

Yeah, because once again we don't really have that authority like a teacher to tell you to do your work. And if there's no one telling me to do my work, I won't do it.

In this quote we can hear that teacher authorities are very crucial to the learning experiences of students and their lack of presence clearly affected students in various ways. As for Ede, she felt that without her teachers being physically present to remind her of her deadlines, it was acceptable to miss assignments. Although these students were struggling, they felt helpless and found it very difficult to seek help. When we asked a student from the non-firstborn group what was causing her the most stress, Adri reported:

My school work piling up and everyone saying you have to bring your grades up and everyone just telling me to bring them up yeah just mainly my school work piling up and seeing it sit there and having to worry about them.

In this quote, we see that, while students were aware that their schoolwork needed to get done, it was very easy to procrastinate and lose track of their assignments.

Effects on mental health:

Another cross cutting theme was that of feeling bad about themselves. Most of these young girls were experiencing emotions that they had never felt prior to the pandemic. The stress from their grades and new changes brought upon unwanted emotions that left them with negative emotions about themselves. Student Ede reported:

They did get a lot worse cuz like like again I didn't have anyone to remind me to like get to work and stuff so I would like slack off and constantly get bad grades and feel bad and I actually felt really bad for a long time and so I would just like cry because I wasn't even doing good at school and so it caused me to feel like i

don't know how to even consider it but um I just wasn't feeling like myself for like two months and that caused me to fail um two classes and so now I have to go to summer school and yeah I missed two months worth of work and its because once again I don't have anyone to hold me to do work, so I mean the teacher can be there and tell me to do the work through zoom or something but I wouldn't really take the seriously because they were not in person telling me.

This student's expression of her emotions shows her confusion towards her own feelings. She voices her emotions without knowing what to call them so much so that it frustrates her and makes her cry. Both groups reported feeling negative emotions once they began to see their grades drop. However, they also felt that they did not have control over the drop in their grades since there was no motivation and a lack of accountability to begin with.

Similarly another student, Angie, also reported a decrease in her grades and made a connection between the decrease in her grades and the current state of her mental health while also being self aware that these effects were because of remote learning:

Yes there was a decrease in my grades and that was one of the negative effects of remote learning. They worsened and that was something that really affected me mentally because I knew that it was because of remote learning.

Angie's experience tells us that although students were able to make the connection between a decrease in their grades and their mental state, improving their grades was a lot harder than simply being self-aware.

Adjusting to home as a new learning space:

All students also reported that adjusting to their home as a learning space was difficult since they found it distracting and as a result affected their performance in their classes. When being asked if they felt that their home environment affected their performance in their classes, Sam from the firstborn group mentioned:

It definitely did because at home I had to help out my siblings with their homework and that would get in the way of my school work.

Girls in the firstborn Latinx group found that having their siblings also take Zoom classes was a distraction because if the siblings needed help, they had to attend to their problems. Another student, Ede, reported that their home was not a good environment to learn in because she associated her home with comfort and not the stress of school. Therefore, she was never in a good mood to learn:

My house just isn't a good environment to learn in. I guess we kinda associate our home with comfort and just not school and that's just how it's been the whole time and now all of a sudden this is where you're supposed to do your work. Maybe if I was in a library or something or a place where I associate with doing work I would be better but that just not my house.

This student clearly viewed her home as separate from her learning and now that she had to combine both she did not know how to adjust. Students from both groups also reported getting interrupted, and constantly being distracted by family members. In addition, two girls in the firstborn group spoke on how their parents did not respect their boundaries when it came to learning from home such as getting interrupted while in class, being told to take on more responsibilities around the house, and looking after their siblings while also being expected to do well in their classes. Additionally, if the parents had to go somewhere and could not leave their children at home, they would take the children with them to run errands meaning that students would either miss class or have to do their class in the car. This was ineffective because their internet was not the best and so they would get disconnected from their Zoom calls. As mentioned prior, all of these girls come from low income communities where most do not have access to reliable internet outside of the hotspot that their school provided. Students in the firstborn group also stated that there was an increase in their chores around the house since they were home more often. When being asked if her responsibilities around the house and in relation to her siblings had changed due to the pandemic, Sam, from the firstborn group reported:

They did because prior to the pandemic I didn't have as many chores since I was mostly in school. During the pandemic I moved so it was just me and my siblings here at home so I would have more chores to do and I would have to help my siblings more and we were home more so I would have to do more chores.

Students in the firstborn group reported an increase in their chores whereas those in the non firstborn group felt that their responsibilities at home remained the same. Iris, Mary and Adri, from the non firstborn group, all answered that their chores did not increase because of the pandemic but rather remained the same.

Disengagement with learning:

Another constant theme across all interviews was that of disengagement with one's classes. All of the students' grades decreased, some had to take summer courses, and others had to drop classes because their grades were being jeopardized. Most students admitted to falling asleep or doing something else other than paying attention during their classes whenever cameras were not mandatory to keep on. Susy reported that after a while she realized she was not learning anything so she stopped engaging with her classes. Another student, Adri, said:

Um, I would usually wake up like 5 or a minute or two before my class starts and you know grab my laptop and log in and then I would do my class but everyday is kind of different because some days I just sleep through all of them or some days I only go to one or two and skip the last one but it just depends on the day but usually I would just be there on the call but sleep through it or I would skip it all honestly.

Adri added that the toughest part of remote learning was the motivation, she did not feel that there was anything motivating her to engage in her classes and therefore, prioritized her sleep.

Distinctive themes:

Sibling responsibility:

Every student in the firstborn group reported having responsibilities in relation to their siblings as the oldest. This meant that as the oldest sibling they had to take on the responsibility of helping their siblings out in their classes whenever they were struggling. Out of the eight participants in the study, only two, Adri and Gina, had a set of parents who were fluent in English; therefore, most of these students had to step up and play the part of a tutor in learning the material and reteaching it to their siblings. Sam from the firstborn group reported:

My siblings were also struggling with their classes and I had to make sure that they were keeping up with their work so it was basically as if I had extra classes to take because if they didn't understand something I had to teach it to them or I would literally go into their google classroom every single day and make sure that they had their homework completed and most of the time they didn't so I would have to basically check it in the night and if they had not completed it then they'd have to do it at night. And because I have two siblings, it was like double the work.

Similarly, because children were always at home, the eldest would have to step in and take care of the younger siblings while the parents were at work. When asking students why they felt that these responsibilities fell on them they answered that it was simply because they were the oldest. On the contrary, the students in the non firstborn group did not report having to look after or assist their siblings, specifically because their siblings were older and independent.

Navigating a new school:

One of the biggest struggles within the firstborn group of students was that of adapting to change. Students found it very difficult to transition to remote learning especially if they were leaving middle school for high school or high school for college. Since these experiences were entirely new to them and were being done so remotely, it was very difficult for them to adapt to these new settings. One student, Sam, was graduating high school and planning to attend a four year university, however the pandemic changed her original plans. In her interview she mentioned how difficult it was to learn so much new information about an entirely different school while being online.

So basically when the pandemic first started I was a senior in high school and I was taking many AP classes and the thing was going into college and being a freshman in college was like the pandemic completely shifted my plans since I was hoping to go into a four year college but instead ended up going to a community college and well obviously the classes are not as easy as in high school so the biggest struggle was adapting to a new environment and also trying to interact with people in classes that I had never met before.

Not only did the pandemic change Sam's plans but it also forced her to adjust and learn the way that community college works while it is being done remotely. Students transitioning into new schools found it even more difficult to adapt to remote learning. Sam's experience transitioning schools during the pandemic caused her to get dropped from one of her courses because she did not understand the college website. Students from both groups reported that it was extremely difficult to keep up with deadlines and assignments since it was all online. However, students also demonstrated their resilience through their ability to try in their classes despite the many challenges they faced. Sam added that although she was dropped from this course she did fairly well in her other classes.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, we can conclude that both groups had similar experiences when it came to learning remotely from home: their grades, lack of motivation and difficulty to focus were all prevalent themes across both groups. This study found that these girls rely heavily on academic spaces and tutoring services in order to succeed since they don't have that help at home. At home they came across many distractions while also not having anyone to turn to for help. This lack of accessibility to learning spaces such as: libraries, classrooms, and studying spaces led to a disengagement with their learning.

However, the firstborn group reported having the additional stressor of watching over their siblings and making sure they were also succeeding in their classes while also having to attend to their parents' expectations around the home. Simultaneously, these same students had

to also be support systems to their younger siblings while having their support systems be either limited or completely removed. Even when these students found themselves struggling, they felt cultural and familial pressures to help their siblings when in need. This pressure stems from familismo, where one's family is equally if not more important than the individual (Flores, 2021). Their hardships and ability to step up and take charge when needed was manifested through their resilience during a difficult time. A lot of the parents in these families did not speak English; therefore these students had to step up and play the role of the parent whenever their parents couldn't help.

For the firstborn Latinx girls, they do not have an older sibling holding them accountable to do their work, and as children of immigrant parents, their parents' English is extremely limited. Therefore, their parents cannot help them either. This time for them is extremely difficult because once they began lacking motivation, it was entirely up to them to find it in them to push through. They therefore rely on their teachers to push them to complete their work and hold them accountable to pay attention during class. With school being online, students in both groups felt that the lack of a teacher's physical presence was discouraging and did not feel pressure to turn in their work. Due to the procrastination and lack of focus, students reported a decrease in their grades which caused them to feel bad about themselves. These students hold their grades to a high standard and want to exceed academically but because they were lacking motivation they felt that obtaining good grades was impossible. The clash between their grades expectations and the reality of them made them feel really bad about themselves. Additionally, the student's home environment was extremely distracting and added to their stressors.

Now that students are returning to school in person, educators should be aware of the mental toll that this past year took on their students and take that into consideration when reviewing their performance throughout this past year. The young girls in this study reported feeling bad about themselves, causing a decline in their mental health. Therefore, schools should be prepared to assist these students with counseling services and professionals that can adhere to their needs. One way that this can happen is through the help of POC counselors that can fit and understand the needs of these girls. Counseling services need to be taken seriously and available for all students so that they can make better sense of their emotions and mental health. Those girls who were transitioning from one school to another found it increasingly stressful to adjust

to a new setting. It is important that schools teach students from a young age how to handle their stress, and what services are available to them if they find themselves feeling worse. For many students this was the first time that they felt mentally unstable. Additionally, a lot of these students come from low income families who can not afford the services to help their children get better. These same families might also not have the knowledge or understanding on the mental health services that their children need to get better. If these emotions are not taken care of then they will transfer over to their following academic school year and continue to affect their performance.

As explored in this study, firstborn Latina students had to take on additional responsibilities around their homes because of their positionality and role, making their experience unique from their peers when learning remotely. I hope that through this study, educators, teachers, and administrators can better understand the experiences of their students in order to better assist them. Additionally, teachers should keep in mind how their students' identities play a role in their performance, especially when looking at students from disadvantaged communities. Some students, such as the ones in this study, have heavy responsibilities: they are translators, tutors and caretakers for their younger siblings and this interferes with their learning. They come from low income households, underrepresented communities, non English speaking families and can not perform at the same level as their peers without the necessary resources that schools offer. Therefore, building equitable education systems that fit their needs are necessary to ensure their success.

Acknowledgements

I want to first and foremost, take the opportunity to thank the young girls who partook in this study and allowed me to share their resilient stories. I also want to thank my amazing mentor Dr. Lee Martin who has guided me through my research and advised me through this entire process. Lastly, this research project was made possible due to the McNair Scholars program and staff who have given me the space, encouragement and support to publish this article.

References

- Cammarota, J. (2004). "The Gendered and Racialized Pathways of Latina and Latino Youth: Different Resistances in the Urban Context." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 35.1: 53-74. *JSTOR*. Web.
- Duckworth, A. L., Kautz, T., Defnet, A., Satlof-Bedrick, E., Talamas, S., Lira, B., & Steinberg, L. (2021). Students attending school remotely suffer socially, emotionally, and academically. *Educational Researcher*, 50(7), 479-482. doi:10.3102/0013189x211031551
- Feliciano C. Rumbaut R.G. (2007). "Gendered paths: Educational and occupational expectations and outcomes among adult children of immigrants." *Ethnic and Racial Studies Volume* 28. Web.
- Flores, Y.G. (2021). *Psychology Perspectives on Chicana and Latinx Families*. (2nd Edition). Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Francis, D. V., & Weller, C. E. (2021). Economic inequality, the digital divide, and remote learning during COVID-19. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 003464462110177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00346446211017797>
- Gil R.M., Vazquez C.N. (1996). *The Maria paradox*. New York: Perigee Book, [[Google Scholar](#)]
- Kara M. Styck, Christine K. Malecki, Julia Ogg & Michelle K. Demaray (2021). *Measuring COVID-19-Related Stress Among 4th Through 12th Grade Students*, *School Psychology Review*, DOI: [10.1080/2372966X.2020.1857658](https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1857658)
- Liu, R. (2021). "Disparities in Disruptions to Postsecondary Education Plans during the COVID-19 Pandemic" *Sage Journals Vol. 7*. Web.
- Longoria, D. A., Rodriguez, N. M., Gonzalez, J. M., & Escobar, R. (2020). Latina daughters and their caregiving roles. *Journal of Mental Health and Social Behaviour*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.33790/jmhsb1100120>

Quandt, S. A., LaMonto, N. J., Mora, D. C., Talton, J. W., Laurienti, P. J., & Arcury, T. A.

(2021). Covid-19 pandemic among immigrant Latinx farmworker and non-farmworker families: A rural–urban comparison of economic, educational, healthcare, and immigration concerns. *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*, 31(1), 30–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048291121992468>

Ramirez, H. (2018). “Counter-Narratives of Latino Men and Machismo in Higher Education” (Dissertation).