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# ENGAGEMENT OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN SCHOOLS: EDUCATIONAL IMPACT FOR SCHOOL REFORM

James Lujan

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ENGAGEMENT OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN SCHOOLS:  
EDUCATIONAL IMPACT FOR SCHOOL REFORM

by

James D. Luján

B.S., Elementary Education, University of New Mexico, 1995

M.A., Multicultural Education, University of New Mexico, 1998

Ed. S, Educational Leadership, University of New Mexico, 2000

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Education**

**Educational Leadership**

The University of New Mexico

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**DEDICATION**

In memory of my father, Hector Luján, and mother, Clorinda Luján, whose wisdom and commitment to an ethical life continue to influence me every day. To my grandmother Dolores Rivera, who recently passed away and is now looking from above saying òque bueno mi hijito que terminaste tu escuela.ö

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## ABSTRACT

Family engagement is widely believed to enhance children's academic achievement. Some children, particularly Latino English language learners, are consistently found at the low end of the achievement gap. This qualitative study examined the relationship between the Epstein Model of Parent Involvement, and the personal engagement of Mexican immigrant families who have a son or daughter enrolled at the middle school level.

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory analysis method. The participants of this study are Mexican immigrant parents who comprised the core sample. Data was collected in participants' homes, community agencies, neighborhoods, and schools. Data sources included interviews, participant observations, and focus groups as well as document analysis at a public middle school in a Southwestern city of the United States.

This research will contribute to understanding of Mexican immigrant families and their needs by providing insight into which of Maslow's hierarchy of needs emerge during family engagement practices and what unique meaning individual family members make of the hierarchy needs that emerge, including, which hierarchy needs are most common among immigrant families, and which hierarchy needs are considered most important to immigrant families engaged in learning processes that may lead towards school reform.

With this study I hope to unveil the intricacies of family and child relationships for this population and family and school partnerships that may lead towards student achievement. In doing so, I hope to provide critical understanding of school community

forms of engagement of immigrant Mexican families to inform researchers and politicians who make decisions and evaluations on effective practices for family engagement of these diverse families.



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Thank you to my dear friend Anita Vigil for her words of encouragement and the positive role model that she is for all kids. To my brother in Christ, Salomón Chávez, who often reminded me that without God and faith nothing is possible. To my dissertation committee members and their guidance and expertise they shared that made it possible for me to complete this study.

Finally, to my best friends and companions, Centavo, Nicle and Cora who stayed up many long nights and maintained at my side, while I conducted my research and completed the last page of this study.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

### Overview of Topic and Study

Throughout the years, researchers continue to debate which exerts more influence on a child's education, the school or the home. Research conducted in the late 1960s indicated that home factors such as socioeconomic and educational levels of parents were far more influential than school factors on cognitive development and school achievement of children (Coleman et al., 1966). Jencks and his associates (Jencks et al., 1972) came to similar conclusions regarding the influence of home and family on adult status. In the late 1970s, researchers began to respond that the home is more important than the school, by showing that parents working with teachers can make a difference for all students, including minority students (Clark, Lotto, & McCarthy, 1980; Edmonds, 1978; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). Children of Mexican immigrant families and the general public have much to gain if wider use is made of the best existing strategies and partnerships are created to develop more effective approaches. Importantly, this partnership has the potential to help children of Mexican immigrant families acquire the knowledge and skills required to participate in the modern economy (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Children of Mexican immigrant families represent one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In 2010, 39% of all children from immigrant families—families in which at least one parent is foreign-born—were of Mexican origin. After Mexico, no other country-of-origin

accounted for more than 4 percent of the total population of children from immigrant families (Hernández, 2004).

### Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined as indicated:

- *Chicano(a)* ó relating to people born in the U.S. with Mexican, Latino or Hispanic heritage or descendents.
- *Educational Plan for Student Success (EPSS)* – a long range plan each district is required to develop, implement, assess and evaluate for the purpose of student achievement and continuous school improvement (6NMAC3.2.9.1)
- *Emigrant* ó refers to an individual who has departed from a country to settle elsewhere. Thus, as an illustration, U.S. residents would identify foreign-born Mexicans who come to reside in the U.S. as immigrants because they came from another country. This same group would be referred to as emigrants by Mexican residents because they departed from their country-of-origin to reside in another place, the U.S. in this case.
- *Engagement* – the act of engaging or the state of being engaged.
- *Family* – a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head household.
- *Hispanic* – relating to people descended from Spanish or Latin American people or their culture.
- *Immigrant* – is the act of moving to or settling in another country or region, temporarily or permanently.

- *Involvement* – to contain as a part; include.
- *Latinos* – Spanish-speaking person of Latin American birth or descent who lives in the U.S.
- *Mexican immigrant* ó the term Mexican immigrant refers to those people who were born and raised in Mexico and immigrated to the United States as adults or young adults.
- *Immigrant* ó refers to an individual who enters and usually becomes established in a country of which he or she is not native-born.
- *Migration* ó the act or process of moving from one region or country to another.
- *Parent* – somebody's mother, father, or legal guardian.

### History of Family Engagement

Over 50 years of studies suggest one of the most effective ways to increase student achievement is for families to be actively engaged in the education of their children (Moll, et. Al., 1992); (Brisk, 2000). A 2002 National Education Service study on family engagement indicates the following:

ÉWhen families are involved students tend to achieve more, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background or parents' educational level.

ÉWhen families are engaged in students' education, those students generally have high grades and test scores, better attendance, and more consistently complete homework.

ÉStudents whose families are engaged in their lives have higher education rates and greater enrollment rates in postsecondary education.



The education of children encompasses their total environment, including the school, home, and community. Family engagement is an important link between the home and the school for home-school cooperation and support.

Exploring Partnerships between School and Home

On October 25, 2005 the Department for Education and Skills published the Schools White Paper "Higher Standards, Better Schools for All" "More Choice for Parents and Students" (DES, 2005). This study placed families firmly at the center of the drive to raise standards by putting an increasing emphasis upon their engagement in the education of their children. Underlying this white paper is the central premise that family engagement makes a *significant* difference to educational outcomes of young people and families have a key role to play in raising educational standards. It also suggests that the more involved and engaged families are in the education of their children the more likely their children are to succeed.

This position was reiterated in the publication "Every Parent Matters" (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). This document emphasizes the importance of family engagement in securing higher standards and improving educational performance. Schools are increasingly conscious of roles played by families in raising achievement. I believe that while family engagement is widely understood to be vital for the achievement of students, it is also essential that today's educators, families and politicians know much more about effective means of engaging families in learning, particularly those families who are "hard to reach" such as Mexican Immigrant parents who may not speak English. My goal as a researcher and practitioner is to see that educators and families across the world engage themselves in school through meaningful,

effective ways that lead towards school reform. The research evidence is consistent, in demonstrating that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. When schools, families and communities work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

Emphasis on the importance of family engagement is based on research findings accumulated over five decades that show children have an advantage in school when families encourage and support school activities. The extent to which the school staff and families work together to promote student learning relationships is related to school effectiveness (Fullan, 1985; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rutter et al., 1979). Effectiveness may include raising student achievement, improving test scores, and/or increasing family and student participation in school community activities.

Henderson (1981) and Becher (1987) both provide comprehensive reviews of studies that document the positive effects of family participation on learning and school socialization of children. The following lists Henderson's main conclusions and Becher reached similar conclusions:

1. Families provide the most important learning environment of all;
2. Family engagement in almost any form can improve student achievement;
3. When families show strong interest in their children's schooling, they promote the development of attitudes that are key to achievement; attitudes that are more a product of how the family interacts than of its social class or income;

4. High achievers are more likely to have active, interested, and involved parents than low achievers;
5. Children whose parents are most involved make the greatest gains.

In summarizing the research on family engagement, there is substantial, extensive, and convincing evidence that families play a crucial role in home and school environments, with respect to facilitating the development of intelligence, achievement, and competence in children. In addition, there is considerable evidence indicating that intervention programs designed to train and encourage families to engage in a variety of experiences with their child are effective in improving cognitive development and achievement.

#### Differential Experiences for Minority and Non-Minority Populations

Family engagement in public schools creates an arena for conflicting expectations among families and schools. I believe it is when expectations of schools and families are congruent that schools and programs are most effective. Conflicts are especially evident when ideologies of families of ethnic minority status meet ideologies of schools because public schooling is usually oriented toward the middle-class non-minority child (Whitson, 1991). For most minority children, school and non-school environments are polarized (Iglesias, 1985; Joffe, 1977; Laosa, 1983; Lightfoot, 1978). I believe race, language and socio-economic status are some things that polarize school personnel and families. The work of Cabrera (1994) indicated that disturbing trends exist among most minority groups and school personnel in education that polarize relationships. A sense of alienation from the school campus and exposure to discriminatory behaviors may account

for differences in educational achievement between minorities and nonminority (Cabrera, 1996).

What counts as "education" in the dominant culture may not have the same relevance for individuals from linguistic minority cultures (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000). Yet students from ethnic minority groups are expected to adapt to cultures of school which in many cases are substantially different from their own culture (Hellstén, 1998; Maruatona & Cervero, 2004; Potterfield & Pace, 1992). This mismatch between cultures of home and school has been labeled *the theory of cultural discontinuity* (Au, 1993) where immigrant children's literacy, cultures, and languages have a marginal place in the official curriculum. Cultural discontinuity has been linked to increased levels of mainstream school failure for immigrant children in a number of studies (e.g. Comber & Hill, 2000; Dias, Arthur, Beecher & McNaught, 2000; Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995).

Schools may not be living up to expectations of families, and families may not be living up to expectations of schools. Many studies indicated poor relationships exist between home life of the minority child and their school life, especially for children of low income and limited English proficient families that are culturally different (Au, 1980; Cardenas & Zamora, 1980; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Erickson & Iglesias, 1984; Fantini, 1980; Heath, 1982, 1983; Laosa, 1977, 1980, 1983; Ogbu, 1981; Philips, 1983; Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974).

### The Evolution of Parent and Family Engagement

More than five decades of federal support and legislation for family engagement came about partially as an answer to discontinuities thought to cause school failure

among minorities. Parent engagement has been mandated in federally funded educational programs since the creation of Head Start in 1965. The Head Start program supporters planned variations from 1967-1971, recognizing that families were the main influence in development of their children. Families were engaged in the programs as advisors, paid assistants, and tutors at home (Zigler & Valentine, 1979). Funded from 1967-1971, Follow-Through programs and Follow-Through Planned variations continued support of Head Start children and their families in grades first through third. The focus on parent engagement in public schools also continued to develop (Rivlin & Timpane, 1975).

The Amendments to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1975 created Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) to assure parents would participate in school programs affecting their children and were supported by federal funds of Title I (Gordon, 1979; Steinberg, 1979). The Bilingual Education Act of 1975 (Title VII of ESEA of 1965) clearly mandated parental participation in the form of PACs. Also, parents were to be informed of instructional goals of the program and progress of their children. With the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, parent participation became a required component of all special education programs. Parents for the first time were defined as full partners in the educational process of their children.

However, even in the special or general education context, family engagement is not well defined. Parents who are advocates for their children may be seen by teachers as troublemakers. Parents who are passive and place their trust in school professionals may be seen as uncaring. The issue regarding parent engagement with programs versus parent

engagement with the child also has been raised (Winston & Turnbull, 1981). That is, what is the importance and impact of different kinds of engagement?

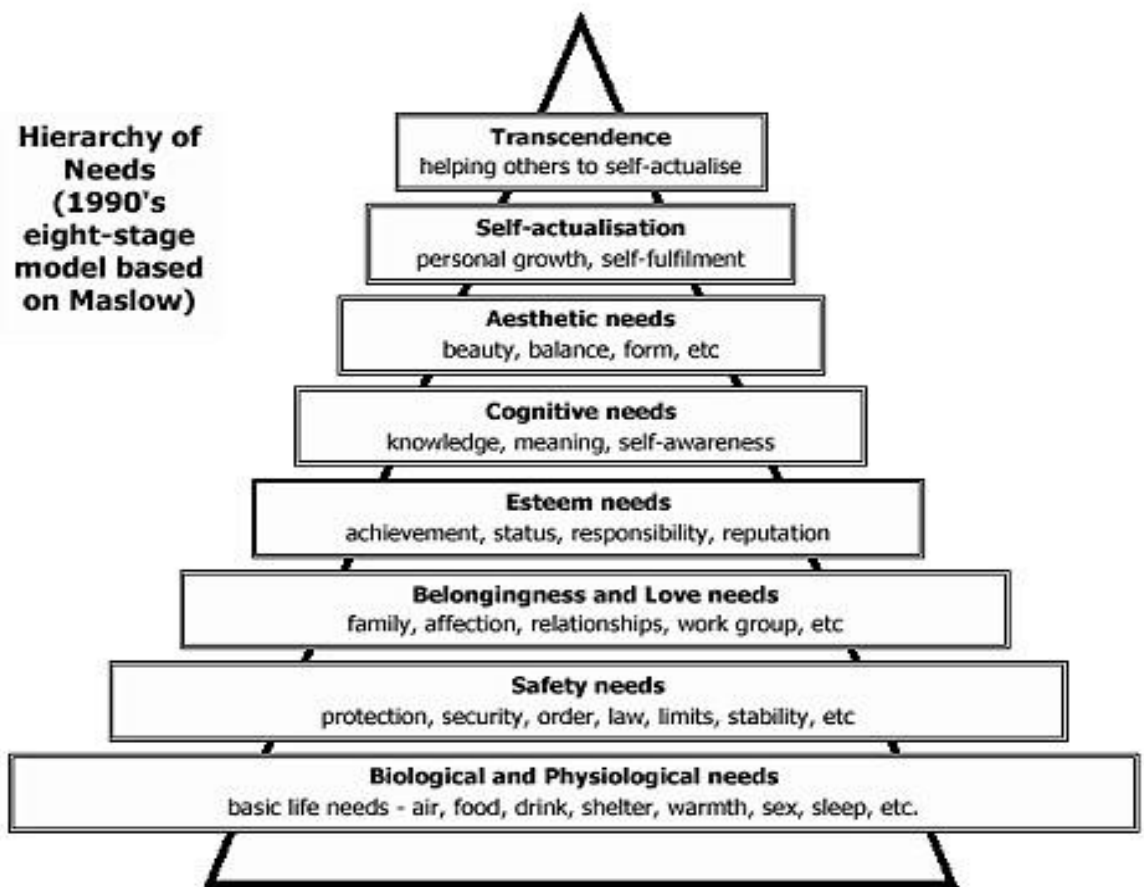
### **Statement and Context of the Problem**

Mexican immigrants are the fastest growing Hispanic origin group in the United States. (Pew Research Center, 2009). Mexicans are immigrating to the United States at a rapid rate (Massey, 1985). A common complaint among educators is that Mexican immigrant families are often conspicuously not engaged in schools, although there is little empirical evidence to document this non-engagement. Unfortunately, many interpret this to mean that these families do not care about their children. My experience as a principal of schools with large Mexican immigrant populations tells me that families do care about their children. This alleged non-commitment of Mexican immigrant families to their children in all likelihood mislabels these parents as uncaring. Mexican immigrant families are undoubtedly concerned about their children's academic progress (Romo, 1986; San Miguel, 1987).

It may be that Mexican immigrant families are involved in ways schools do not recognize. There seems to be a mismatch between what schools expect of families and what families expect of schools. This mismatch may be due to low socio-economic status of many Mexican immigrants. Perhaps low income families are concerned with survival issues and are unable to deal with meeting other, more elevated needs such as parent engagement in schools (Eheart & Ciccone, 1982; Maslow, 1970). Abraham Maslow (1970) came up with a model of needs that motivates each one of us. Our most basic needs are inborn, having evolved over tens of thousands of years. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs helps to explain how these needs motivate us all. He states

that we must satisfy each need in turn, starting with the first, which deals with the most obvious needs for survival. Only when lower order needs of physical and emotional well-being are satisfied can we become concerned with higher order needs of influence and personal development. Conversely, if things that satisfy our lower order needs are hopeless, we are no longer concerned about the maintenance of our higher order needs.

**Figure 1 Abraham Maslow Hierarchy of Needs**



Source: Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396. Retrieved June 2001, from <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>.

Figure 1. Abraham Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Model

Cultural Aspects of Mexican Immigrant Families

Mexican immigrant families may see the roles of parents and schools as separate. Epstein (1987) makes it clear that the most basic involvement of parents is providing for their children's needs of food, clothing, shelter, health, and safety. Families in survival mode may feel they are fulfilling their educational responsibilities by making sure their children get enough sleep and eat a good breakfast on school days. Mexican immigrant families see their essential role as ensuring that children have food, clothing, and shelter so they are socialized into norms and expectations of the family. Also, it is essential for Mexican children to know their own culture and expected role within the culture. Above all, they expect their children to acquire *buena educación* (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991), or good manners.

Family engagement practices in Mexico are very different from practices in the United States. The *concept* of family engagement is an American concept. In Spanish, the word *educación* has a different meaning than it does in English. Teachers in Mexico are seen as high ranking members of society, on par with doctors, lawyers, and priests. Typically, children are taught to respect teachers and not to question them. This is similar in the older Mexican generation who wouldn't think of coming into a classroom and telling the teacher what to do or question their motives and teaching styles.

Mexican families have *funds of knowledge* that can be important educational resources for schools and in classrooms (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Moll et al., 1992). Many studies of new immigrants report that they identify barriers to school involvement, such as language barriers, feeling unwelcome in schools, lack of knowledge as to how the American schooling system works. In many cases, Mexican parents nonetheless reported



high educational expectations for their children. (Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Moreno & López, 1999).

### Facing Economic Stresses

Low income families commonly perceive themselves as having external locus of control (Lefcourt, 1982; Rotter, 1966). This may mean they believe that their destiny is controlled by fate, God, or powerful others versus self. That is, they typically feel they do not have control of resources that could alleviate their situation. This kind of parent would not be inclined to participate in schools. According to Rotter, the following are definitions of external and internal locusts of control:

- Refers to the extent to which individuals perceive they can control events that affect them. Individuals with a high *internal locus of control* believe events result primarily from their own behavior and actions. Those with a high *external locus of control* believe in powerful others or fate.
- Those with a high *internal locus of control* have better control of their behavior and tend to exhibit more political behaviors than *externals* and are more likely to attempt to influence other people; they are more likely to assume their efforts will be successful. They are more active in seeking information and knowledge concerning their situation than do *externals*. The propensity to engage in political behavior is stronger for individuals who have a high *internal locus of control* than for those who have a high *external locus of control*.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2007), the median annual personal earnings that Mexican immigrants earned working year-round were \$23,000 versus \$40,000 earned by U.S. born. The annual personal earning clearly demonstrates a mismatch, which may possibly be a result of different cultural and educational experiences of the families.

There is limited research regarding low-income Mexican immigrants, and also very little written about attitudes of Mexican families towards their own engagement in schools. Their expectations for the future of their children and their understanding of etiology may be additional factors that influence their engagement or non-engagement in the school system.

#### Specific Stressors for Mexican Immigrant Families

Mexican immigrant families with school-aged children manifest systemic concerns directly related to specific stressors experienced by the population, stressors often inseparably related to the individual's or family's immigrant status in their new community. Socioeconomic stress is a significant variable in the academic success and psychosocial health of children. Students who live in poverty are reported to experience higher rates of violence (Dryfoos, 1990) and substance abuse (Walsh, Bucldley, & Howard, 1998), as well as lower rates of academic success (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Additionally, the Children's Defense Fund (2004) reports that children who live in poverty are more likely to lack adequate food, health care, and housing, and receive lower scores in reading and math. Based on Maslow Hierarchy of Needs, children in poverty have a hard time focusing in higher order activities such as learning when lower order survival needs are unmet on any given day and especially over

time. Minority students, specifically African American and Latino students are twice as likely to live in poverty and attend high-poverty schools as are European American children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

The poverty rate for Mexican immigrants hovers at 25.8%, the second highest poverty rate for immigrant populations in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The percentage of Mexican immigrant children under the age of 18 living in poverty is 35.4% as compared to a rate of 10.6% for non-Hispanic Whites.

Stressors such as conflicting cultural values between home and school (Espinoza-Herold, 2003), low socioeconomic status (Dryfoos, 1990; Garcia, 2001), isolation due to language (Garcia), intergenerational conflicts resulting from differing levels of acculturation (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001b), and fear and anxiety related to undocumented status (Valdes, 1996) specifically impact Mexican immigrant populations. These stressors, while being harmful to overall health of family functioning, also impact the ability of Mexican immigrant students to be successful in U.S. schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001a). For the purpose of this discussion, each of the aforementioned stressors will be explored as a function of the family's and child's interactions with the U.S. education system and in relation to its impact on family functional health.

Mexican immigrant children typically enter the U.S. educational system filled with hopeful, high expectations (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and a lengthy tradition of respect for and identification with both nuclear and extended family, termed familismo (Santiago-Rivera, 2003). These students tend to embody characteristics

typifying their collective worldview, including cohesiveness and interdependence (Gracia & De Greiff; 2000). In American schools, they are quickly immersed in a cultural environment steeped in independence and individuality (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). These values conflict with traditional Mexican cultural values, often prompting children to shirk cultural capital of home life for expectations of school culture (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). Conflicting home and school cultural expectations faced by children often lead to dissonance and disequilibrium within the family.

### Language Barriers for Mexican Immigrant Families

Mexican immigrant children are often caught in the middle of two worlds separated by a clearly defined barrier: language. At school, the children are exposed to English much more intensely than are their parents, who often accept jobs that provide very little exposure to English (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001a). Due to their intense level of involvement with the English language, children become skilled with the language much more quickly than their parents. Many children may even begin to lose some of their native language (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco). This loss of language leaves parents and children unable to effectively share their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and needs (Garcia, 2001). Consequently, many divisive situations may arise in families as a function of the differences in the language experiences of the parents and children. These divides are particularly difficult for Mexican immigrant families, whose culture highly values close intrafamilial relationships (Santiago-Rivera, 2003).

Intergenerational conflict also often erupts due to differences in levels and rate of acculturation between parents and children (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001a). As with language acquisition, children typically acculturate to American culture much more

quickly than do their parents through their immersion in the school environment (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). Schools provide a high level of cultural contact and children typically adopt American mannerisms and values more quickly than their parents.

### Immigration Status

For many Latino immigrants in the United States, typical stress of migration is amplified by undocumented status (Passel, Capps, & Fix, 2004). The Pew Hispanic Center (Passel, 2005) reports that 80-85% of all immigrants from Mexico in recent years had undocumented status. Approximately 1.7 million people, or one sixth of the undocumented immigrant population, are under 18 years of age. Children who are undocumented often fear being distinguishable from their peers due to apprehension that recognition may bring deportation and separation from family and friends (Valdes, 1996). Immigration status impacts the ways children are able to adapt to the turmoil of immigration (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001b) by restraining the openness with which these children embrace their new lives and country.

Families and teachers need to become informed about each others' talents and expectations. There is very little in the literature investigating attitudes and expectations of Mexican immigrant families towards schools. Little is known about Mexican immigrant families' views of their own roles as educators and making meaning of contributions made through engagement and participation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this study I seek to identify, understand and investigate perceptions of Mexican immigrant families towards schools and contributions made through family engagement that support student achievement. As policies are created regarding family engagement,

more effective outcomes would result if perceptions and input from all families are considered. It is essential for school personnel to get familiar with family involvement and to set realistic and appropriate expectations for family engagement. The moment educators overestimate or underestimate the abilities, cultures, class and national congruence of engagement and expectations of families, they may either set families up for failure, or school educators may not give families a fair opportunity to access the school system. This type of behavior may be done intentionally (through purposeful neglect or even discrimination) or unintentionally (through lack of understanding, awareness or competency). In either case, it is ultimately the education of the child that is at stake.

As this population has grown in U.S. schools, so has overrepresentation of Mexican immigrant youth in status dropout rates and among students experiencing academic struggles and academic disengagement or failure (Garcia, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) specifically includes Hispanic students as a distinct subgroup whose progress, as demonstrated by increased levels of achievement, is linked to performance determinations and subsequent federal funding for public education institutions. Education professionals must seek to understand troubling educational outcomes due to failures manifested by our educational system and its educators.

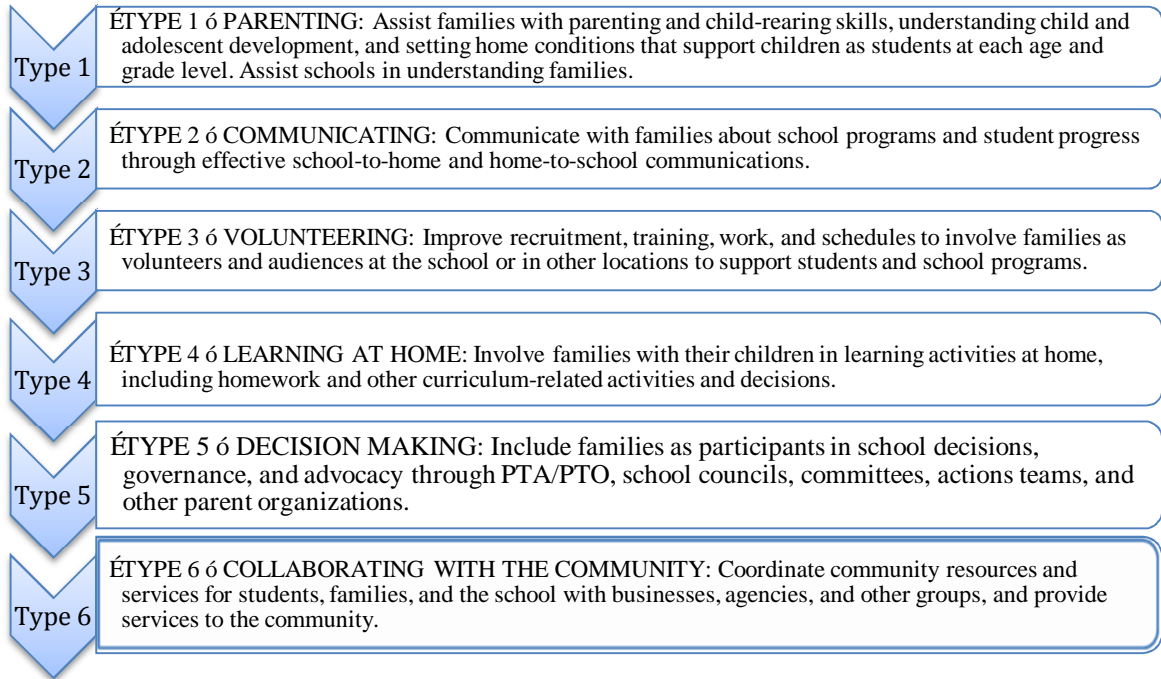
Through data collected via parent interviews, observations of family engagement activities and family focus groups, this study will assess the needs, concerns, and attitudes of Mexican immigrant families of students attending a public middle school in a Southwestern city of the United States in order to establish a better understanding of

relationships between Mexican immigrant families and educators. The results will help identify factors related to lack of engagement. My hope is that this study will provide a guide for school personnel towards positive partnerships with Mexican immigrant families by building awareness and competence to provide for the needs of these families and students. In addition, my hope is to explore ways that family and school engagement exists in a positively contributing towards student achievement.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study will utilize a qualitative inquiry comprised of a series of stages to explore the development of successful, inclusive partnerships with Mexican immigrant families. A comprehensive model called the Epstein model (2009) will be used to serve as a pattern or blueprint for making tangible concepts that undergird professional practices. Through this study, I will examine the connection between Epstein's model and the personal partnerships and experiences of Mexican immigrant families at the public middle school. As such, it will contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding strong family partnerships with the school community.

The key components of the model are on Figure 2:



Source: School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed).

(Epstein et al., 2002, p. 165).

**Figure 2. Epstein’s Six Types of Involvement**

In addition, my study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in the partnerships between school personnel and specifically Mexican immigrant families in the school community. The school I will study as part of my research is in a Southwestern state of the United States and is considered an urban public middle school with high population of Mexican immigrant students. I selected this school community for my research in part because the school has a history of proud immigrant families who reside and attend the school and therefore; should be most relevant to those interested in this topic.



## Research Questions

The main research question and three sub-questions that will support and direct this research study are:

- Research Question: *How do Mexican immigrant families engage with their children, schools, and community for the purpose of raising student achievement?*
  - Research Subquestions:
    - *What unique meaning do Mexican immigrant families make of their engagement in schools?*
    - *What do immigrant Mexican parents and their children identify as helpful and limiting to their relationship with schools?*

## Assumptions of the Study

After conducting preliminary conversations with the district supervisor of the public middle school where I plan to study, I hope and have some confidence from the discussions that there is willingness among most Mexican immigrant families at this institution to participate in my research study. Of course, all family focus groups are completely voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Further, I assume that each Mexican immigrant family and the school community personnel will contribute to the best of their ability and knowledge to recall participation and contributions made either during the initial interview or during the follow-up interview at the school or at the home. Also, based on my research design and analysis of school

documents, such as the EPSS (Educational Plan for Student Success), I assume that coding and interpreting school personnel and family members' responses will be possible and that mapping them will be relatively straightforward.

### **Strengths of the Study**

I have extensive experience in conducting interviews and focus groups as well as some experience in observing behaviors in and out of the school context. My use of method triangulation, a combination of research methods (interviews, focus groups, and observations), built into this research, is another strength of the study. By employing three methods of data collection I will generate a fuller, multilayered data set than one or two methods would generate. Also, choosing to conduct my research at two school sites, one that is beginning to implement family engagement practices and one that is ready to further their family engagement plan and commitments to the next level may be considered a strength. The strength would be that each school community could learn from each other and share ideas for better partnerships and designs. However, some of the strongest aspects of the design and analysis in the study may also be limitations to some extent. For example, my experience as a researcher and a veteran administrator in the Albuquerque Public Schools for the past eleven years, working hand in hand with multiple Mexican immigrant families from primary to secondary schools allow for the study of family engagement and may prove to be a strength as well as a limitation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The design of the research, the assumptions of the study, the manner of selecting participants, as well as the collection and analysis of the data are all subject to my values

and biases as a researcher though I will strive toward neutrality by questioning my assumptions, asking for examples etc. throughout. I am an academic educator who has experiences in family engagement and turning around schools academically. Having knowledge of reform efforts and practices school leaders assume during implementation of their family components provides the opportunity for heightened insight, yet also the natural inevitability of bias. Therefore, I will have some effect on the study in spite of the care I take to limit that effect. In addition, my learning of different dialects of the Spanish language should be an advantage. I was raised by a Mexican father and a Chicana mother who both taught me their Spanish dialects, which allows me to understand most Spanish speakers.

This qualitative research study will be confined to Mexican immigrant families at two urban middle schools. I will use a purposive sampling method to select participants from those two school communities. The study's participants will be Mexican immigrant individuals who have children and/or siblings who attend and who voluntarily agreed to be interviewed or attend a focus group.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The study will be delimited to a public middle school in a Southwestern city that currently has a family plan for student success and agrees to be studied. The school to be included in this study has the following demographics: 96% Hispanic students and families, which includes a 40% Mexican immigrant population at the site. The school is classified "in need of improvement" based on the state's adequate yearly progress report for the 2010-2011 school year. The limitation and delimitations of the study may offer opportunities for future research.

## Summary and Organization of the Research Study

Many schools are experiencing a need to engage all families in order to transform the school academically and meet state and federal adequate yearly progress. At the same time a rapid change in family structures, school diversity, and academic progress is occurring within the schools in the US. This phenomenon is especially true of schools that have large populations of Mexican immigrant children and whose families are willing to engage deeper in the education of their children. I will conduct a study that seeks to identify and understand the relationship between Mexican immigrant families and the school sitting in an urban area that is part of a large public school district located in a Southwestern city of the US.

To accomplish this research I will use a constructivist grounded theory analysis. To conduct the research I plan on touching on theoretical bases for mixing three methods: individual interviews, participant observations and focus groups and how they each factor into a constructivist grounded theory analysis.

Chapter 2 consists of a literature review and discussion of family engagement in schools and at home and contributions towards school reform. Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of my research design, philosophy, positionality and procedures. Chapter 4 will contain my research findings and analysis of the data. Chapter 5 will present my meaning making of the finding and recommendations for further research and implications for practice.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction and Summary of Review

A review of literature on Mexican immigrants' culture and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, immigrants in education, family systems theories, access to public education, and current trends in working with parents and families of secondary students is vital to understand the context in which this research is conducted. This chapter begins with a discussion of important concepts that are commonly misunderstood.

The belief that family engagement has a positive effect on students' academic achievement is intuitively appealing to policy makers, teachers, administrators, families and students alike. This belief has a firm foundation both in literature concerning family engagement and in the school improvement research base. The empirical evidence suggests that family engagement is one of the key factors in securing higher student achievement and sustained school performance (Harris and Chrispeels 2006).

Engaging parents in schooling leads to more parent and student engagement in teaching and learning processes. The importance of parents' educational attitudes and behaviors on children's educational attainment has also been well documented especially in developmental psychology literature. Elements of parents' educational attitudes and behaviors, such as the provision of a cognitively stimulating home environment, family engagement in children's activities and parental beliefs and aspirations, have been identified as having a significant effect on children's levels of educational achievement (Feinstein, et al., 2006, p.1).

## How Review of Literature Informs this Study

### Systemic Importance of Mexican Immigrant Educational Success

The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) estimates that there are 50.5 million Hispanics in the United States which makes this ethnic group 16% of the total U.S. population. Out of the 50 plus million Hispanics, Mexicans are the largest Hispanic origin group. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that it cannot be used to determine the legal status of Mexican populations in the United States. Additionally, 17% of all students enrolled in US public schools in 2000 came from Hispanic families (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau). Children of immigrants are the most quickly growing strata of the child population (Hernandez, 1999). In the United States, there are approximately 23.4 million children under the age of 6, with 22% of these population children of immigrants (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). These statistics illuminate the force the Latino population has become in the American educational system. Of Latino groups (Cubans, Central Americans, South Americans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans), the Mexican immigrant population is the youngest group, with the median age being approximately 24 (Santiago-Rivera, 2003).

As this population has grown in U.S. schools, so has overrepresentation of Mexican immigrant youth in status dropout rates and among students experiencing academic struggles and academic disengagement or failure (Garcia, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) specifically includes Hispanic students as a distinct subgroup whose progress, as demonstrated by increased levels of achievement, is linked to performance determinations and subsequent federal funding for public education institutions. Thus, education professionals must seek to understand how

troubling educational outcomes manifested by Mexican immigrant students are linked to specific stressors facing this population including poverty, isolation due to language, family conflict resulting from acculturation patterns, and citizenship status. My goal is to research the influences that contribute to the parents' efforts that cause engagement in their children's education and the contributions that these families are making to the success of the schools.

### **Definitions and Interpretations**

Despite the significant amount of research in this field, there are considerable differences and difficulties in defining family engagement. It includes parents and families coming into schools informally as well as more formal opportunities such as meetings with teachers or taking part in their children's education through classroom participation. In some cases it includes parents' own learning (Carpentier et al. 2005). More recently, researchers recognized that the concept of family engagement is multidimensional and includes a multitude of family activities regarding children's education (Epstein 1992; Lareau 1989; Muller 1995; 1998). In general, studies fall into three broad categories: 1. Studies on the *impact* of family and community involvement on student achievement. 2. Studies on effective *strategies* to connect schools, families, and community. 3. Studies on *parent and community* organizing efforts to improve schools. These studies comprise a new, still developing arena of research where much more work is needed on the impact of different types of family engagement.

Family engagement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and

high aspirations relating to personal fulfillment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance. Some studies break down parental involvement into a series of discrete types of participation and home-school partnership, substantively based around the ongoing activities and practices involved. In Britain, for example, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (1991) produced a typology of home-school relations around 'what the schools do for parents', 'what parents do for schools', and 'parents as governors', while Sally Tomlinson's (1991) typology covers communication between home and school; parental involvement in (i) learning and (ii) day-to-day activities; parental informal involvement; and parental formal (and legal) involvement.

There are various types of engagements which produce an influential classification of types of involvement that pay more explicit attention to home and school and six different types of engagement as follows: Type 1, 'Basic obligations of parents', covering the provision of 'positive home conditions' that support children's learning; establishing a positive learning environment at home; Type 2, 'Basic obligations of schools', covering a range of 'communications from school-to-home', parent-school communications about school programs and student progress; Type 3, 'Parent involvement at school', in the classroom and attending events; Type 4, 'Parent involvement in learning activities', at home, including parent, child, and teacher-initiated projects, and parent and school communications regarding learning activities at home; and Type 5, 'Parent involvement in governance and advocacy'. She subsequently extended her typology to cover another type of partnership: Type 6, 'Collaborating with the community', covering resources and services that strengthen home-school links



(Epstein, 1991). In the United States, attempts to enhance family engagement programmatically have featured in federal, state and local education policies (Epstein 1992).

Within the research literature the operational use of family engagement has not been clear or consistent. Family engagement has been defined as representing many different parental behaviors and family practices, such as parental aspirations for children's academic achievement and delivery of such aspirations to their children (Bloom 1980), parents' communication with children about school (Christenson et al. 1992; Walberg 1986), parents' participation in school activities (Stevenson et al. 1987e.g., ), parents' communication with teachers about their children (Epstein 1991e.g., ), and parental rules imposed at home that are considered to be education-related (e.g., Keith et al. 1993; Keith et al. 1986; Marjoribanks 1983). This range of interpretations suggests that family engagement is multifaceted in nature, because family engagement subsumes a wide variety of parental behavioral patterns and parenting practices (e.g., Balli 1996; Brown 1994; Snodgrass 1991).

There is also the question of conventional definitions of 'parent' and 'family' which often exclude single parents and guardians, and which often uphold white and middle-class notions of parenthood (Vincent et al. 1997). In her work, Crozier (1999) shows that family engagement is inundated with problems of definition and those parents are far from a homogeneous grouping, even though schools often treat them differently. Hallgarten (2000, p.18) argues, parental involvement currently acts as a 'lever' maximizing 'the potential of the already advantaged' by engaging with those parents most likely to

reflect the norms and values of the school and ignoring those hard to reach parents and families who are less likely to readily embrace the cultural norms of the school.

Inevitably research concerning the impact of family engagement on achievement and attainment is complex due to the interaction and influence of other variables. Early research provided a rather mixed set of findings and conclusions about this relationship. The research conducted in the 60s and 70s as mentioned in chapter 1 revealed inconsistent and varied findings about the impact of family engagement. Some studies found that family engagement had no effect on student achievement, while others found positive effects. Such inconsistencies have subsequently been explained by variations in definition and methodology along with some technical weaknesses located in certain studies. For example, different definitions of family engagement were used across the early studies; some took it to be "good parenting" which went on in the home while others took it to be "talking to teachers and link activities at the school. Also different measures or assessments of family engagement were used ranging from teachers' or parents' or student judgments or researchers' observations. Measuring different "things" or measuring the same "thing" with different metrics resulted in serious inconsistencies in the research base and confusion about the exact nature of the impact of family engagement on achievement.

In contrast, later research studies were more methodologically robust and generated findings that were more consistent (Desforges et al. 2003). Collectively, the contemporary practical evidence points towards a powerful association between family engagement and student achievement. It highlights that family engagement in learning at home throughout the age range is much more significant than any factor open to

educational influence. For example, a parent who takes time with their child at home with school work, educational lessons, or academic activities may be a positive influence and have some type of impact on student achievement. Researchers also acknowledge that family engagement is only one of many factors which have an impact on student achievement (Sacker et al. 2002).

Longitudinal studies such as those conducted by Sylva et al (1999) and Meluish et al (2001) provide the most recent research evidence about family engagement. These studies reinforce the impact of family engagement in learning activities at home with better cognitive achievement, particularly in the early years. In contrast family engagement acted out in the school confers little or no real benefit on the individual child (Okpala et al. 2001). Similarly, other studies (Ho Sui-Chu et al. 1996) suggest that family engagement which takes the form of in-school parental activity has little effect on individual attainment. The research makes it clear that parents and families working in schools have no tangible contribution to academic attainment of individual students, (though it is valuable for the schools and parents in terms of community relations).

A review of the literature concludes that those studies using contemporary techniques of data analysis from large data sets have safely established that family engagement in the form of interest in the child and *manifest in the home* as parent-child discussions can have a positive effect on children's behavior and achievement. This is not to suggest that family engagement always has such positive effects as it is clear that there are many factors which impose upon the quality and nature of family engagement. The aim of this overview of the literature is to summarize what is currently known about

family engagement and its potential benefits in terms of educational achievement and success (Desforges, and Abouchaar 2003).

## **Emerging Themes**

### Effects of Family Engagement

As highlighted earlier, the research base suggests that family engagement has an important effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors (such as social class, maternal education and poverty) have been factored out. Among non-school factors of school achievement like socioeconomic background, parent's educational attainment, family structure, ethnicity, and involvement; it is the latter which is the most strongly connected to attainment (Feinstein et al. 1999). Recent research shows that family aspiration/expectation on their children's achievements has a strong impact on results at school while the effect of supervision of their work is only marginal (Fan et al. 2001). A list of involvement initiatives as 'good' family and parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values, and high aspirations relating to personal fulfillment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, p.2).

Impact of family engagement arises from parental values and educational aspirations that are continuously exhibited through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting. While the effects of family engagement, as manifest in the home, can be significant, they are influenced by a wide range of factors (Desforges and Abouchaar,

2003; Fan & Chen, 2001). Henderson and Mapp (2002) conducted a thorough review of two decades of research on parent involvement, structuring their examination around three topics: Studies on the impact of *family and community involvement* on student achievement; studies on *effective strategies* to connect schools, families, and community; and studies on *family and community* organizing efforts to improve schools.

The findings from these studies suggest that family engagement can reinforce existing power divisions between schools, teachers and families, and reproduce, rather than break down, existing educational inequalities around class, gender and ethnicity (see, for example, Crozier et al. 2000; David 1993; Fine 1993; Hanafin et al. 25 2002; Lareau 1989; Rea et al. 1998; Vincent 1996; Vincent et al. 2000). This is, in part, because family engagement initiatives presuppose that schools, families, and students are relatively consistent and equally willing and capable of developing family engagement schemes, which is not always the case.

### Context and Family Engagement

Disentangling the web of variables enmeshing the whole of family-school relationships and their impact on learning is daunting, and placing all the fragments of specific knowledge on the subject into a coherent, theoretical framework is a challenge (Redding et al. 2004). Yet it is clear that levels of engagement vary considerably depending on families and the context in which they find themselves. Williams et al (2002) surveyed parents of children aged 5 ó 16 attending schools in England to establish degree of engagement in their children's education. A telephone survey was used to contact 2019 households to conduct interviews to establish family levels of practical help in schools, their relationship with their child's teacher(s) and parents' involvement with

homework. Twenty nine percent of parents felt very involved ó the more so in primary than in secondary schools. Mothers felt more involved than fathers. Thirty-five percent strongly agreed they wanted to be more engaged while about three quarters of parents wanted to be at least somewhat more involved. Ninety-four percent found school welcoming and eighty four percent reported that the school was willing to involve them. Despite this level of satisfaction, sixteen percent felt they might be seen as trouble makers if they talked too much.

While many families wanted to increase their engagement, to include, for example, supporting extra-curricular initiatives, they felt the main barriers to further engagement were limitations on their own time. The vast majority of families felt very (38%) or fairly (51%) engaged in their child's education. However, engagement clearly varies across different groups of families. Men are less likely to help with their child's homework because of work patterns. Those in lower social classes (.i.e. those from households where the main income earner's occupation is an unskilled manual job or where the family is dependent on state benefits only) are also less likely to say they feel very engaged due to their over load with work and schedules. A major factor mediating family engagement is parental socio-economic status whether by occupational class or parental (especially maternal) level of education. Socioeconomic status (SES) mediates both family engagement and student achievement.

SES has its impact in part negatively through material deprivation and in part through attitudes and behaviors to education (Sacker et al, 2002). Feinstein and Sabates (2006) found an association between the duration of mother's full time education and her attitudes and behaviors. Results from their study show that an additional year of post-

compulsory schooling from mothers was significantly associated with the index of educational attitudes and behaviors. For instance, mothers who stay in full time education beyond the minimum school leaving age are more likely to demonstrate positive educational attitudes and behaviors such as reading to their children.

As educational levels for those with lower educational aspirations rise, individuals with positional ambition increase their education further in order to maintain a relative advantage (Okpala et al. 2001). Simply increasing the duration of education will not generate changes in attitudes and behaviors as much depends on the quality and nature of the educational experience. However, it would seem that the educational effect of post-compulsory education on a mother's attitude towards her children's educational achievement is largely a positive one. Family engagement is also strongly positively influenced by the child's level of attainment: the higher the level of attainment, the more families get involved (Okpala et al. 2001). Families expectations set the context, within which young people develop, shape their own expectations, and provide a framework within which decisions are made. However, there are significant differences between families in their level of engagement that are clearly associated with social class, poverty, health, and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it.

Students from low socio-economic families are more likely to be disaffected from school, as are students who attend schools with a high percentage of students of low socio-economic status. As risk factors compound, students from low socio-economic status families are even more likely to be dissatisfied with school. This phenomenon of 'double jeopardy' (Williams 2003) is also evident in analyses of student achievement:

low SES students who also attend schools that predominantly serve low socio-economic status students are especially at risk of poor school performance because they have two factors working together (OECD 2003, p. 48). Students are more likely to be engaged in school if they attend schools with a high average socio-economic status, a strong disciplinary climate, good student teacher relations and high expectations for student success. Students from low SES families are more likely to attend schools where the average socio-economic status is low. This is not to suggest that all young people from low SES backgrounds are likely to underachieve or to become disaffected.

Indeed, the evidence suggests that there are a large number of students engaged in school, even from low SES families or with relatively weak literacy skills (OECD 2003, p. 53). Instead it is to highlight the challenges these young people and their families face in overcoming cultural, social and financial barriers that stand in the way of reaching their potential.

Much research suggests these differences relating to economic status carry over into the area of family engagement; that while families want the best for their children, working class families may not automatically expect the same outcomes as middle class families (National Centre for Social Research 2004). As Lupton (2006) points out 'most working class families think education is important but see it as something that happens in the school, not the home'. An expectation of social mobility through education also remains small within this population. It remains the case that social class has a powerful impact on subsequent educational attainment.



Low attainers are disproportionately from lower social classes while the middle classes have benefited most from expansion of higher education in the 80s and 90s (Blanden et al. 2004). Middle class families are more likely to have culturally supportive social networks, use the vocabulary of teachers, feel entitled to treat teachers as equals, and have access to childcare and transportation; all of which facilitate family engagement in education. This allows them to construct their relationships with the school with more comfort and trust. It would seem that educational odds are still stacked against children from low income families and this is a pattern that persists (Platt 2005).

As ethnicity is strongly correlated to SES, it is important to try and recognize that any differences in levels of family engagement across different ethnic groups may actually be differences related to SES. However, variations in family engagement are apparent across different ethnic groupings. Yan (1999) found that successful Afro-American students have equal or higher levels of family engagement than those of successful Euro Americans and significantly higher than those of unsuccessful Afro-American students. The Achievement among Asian students was negatively associated with family engagement (both home and school) as a significant element of Asian culture attributes success to personal effort and not to family support or guidance. Overall the general impact of family engagement seems to work across all ethnic groups studied. With younger children (aged 8 ó 13 years), Zellman and Waterman (1998) observed differences in the forms of family engagement across ethnic groups but the impact of student achievement was mediated by parenting style. Once this was factored out, no ethnically based, achievement-related differences were evident. In similar vein, Smith and Hausafus (1998) studied the impact of family engagement and ethnicity on science

and math achievement using an intervention study. A sample of 8<sup>th</sup> grade (14 year olds) at risk, minority students and their families were invited to participate in courses intended to enhance achievement through working with families.

Across all groups, students did better if their families helped them see the importance of taking advanced science and math courses and took them to exhibitions, science fairs, and the like. No ethnic differences were reported. Families who are more involved in their adolescents' schooling, regardless of parents' gender or educational level, have offspring who do better in school, irrespective of the child's gender, ethnicity, or family structure (p.729). In summary, the general impact of family engagement seems to work in support of student attainment across all ethnic groups. Family engagement, especially in the form of parental values and aspirations modeled in the home, is a major positive force shaping students' achievement and adjustment.

#### Barriers to Engagement

There is an extensive empirical literature on barriers to family engagement in education. Some barriers reflect clear gender differences in childcare arrangements, other barriers are work related and some, as already highlighted, are socially constructed. One of the most cited reasons for families not being engaged in schooling is work commitments. Lack of time and childcare difficulties seem to be significant factors, predominantly for women and those working full-time. Most families see the main limitation to involvement in education arising from demands on their time and restrictions of work on their availability to attend events such as parents' evenings.

Single parents feel very restricted in this respect and tend to be least responsive to invitations and requests from school (Anning 2000, September; Standing 1999).

However, the issue of time is part of a more complex picture of social and economic variables. It is clear that a major mediating factor in family engagement in schooling is the socioeconomic status of the parent or family. Families from low SES backgrounds are less likely to get engaged in education, particularly at the secondary level. Nechyba et al (1999) summarized three possible mechanisms through which social class might operate as a barrier to family engagement. First, the suggestion is that there is a 'culture of poverty' in which working class families place less value on education than middle class families and hence are less disposed to participate. Second, working class families have less 'social capital' in terms of social networks and skills. They do not know the 'right sort of people'. In consequence, regardless of disposition, working class parents either are, or feel they are, less well equipped to negotiate and deliver on the demands of schooling. Third, working class families face certain institutional barriers as schools are middle class institutions with their own values. They accept engagement only on their own terms which in most cases are non-negotiable. Consequently, those families not conforming to these values are quickly 'put in their place'.

A study reported that 16% of families were wary of overstepping some unwritten mark in their relations with teachers (Williams et al. 2002). Family evenings are a particularly well documented site for creating parental frustration and confusion (Cullingford et al. 1999; Power et al. 2000). In the latter study, 'there was not so much marked antipathy (between families and teachers) as mutual fear' (p.259). Crozier (1999) interviewed in depth a sample of parents (71% working class) on the experience of home-

school relations and found (a) many working class families have perceptions of teachers as superior and distant (b) these perceptions are reinforced by the teachers' stance (c) teachers engage with families only on their own terms. For example, most of the times teachers schedule the parent/teacher conferences without consulting with the parent to determine best time and day for both (d) this does not encourage families to be proactive in partnership, rather it encourages family fatalism in regard to their children's schooling.

While there is a broadly held desire amongst families for more engagement in schooling there are clearly material (time and money) and psychological barriers which operate differentially (and discriminately) across social classes and individual differences among families that operate within social classes. It remains the case that middle class families are more engaged in education than those lower down the social scale and are more likely to have the material circumstances to support their children's learning. Also middle class children are more inclined to go along with the idea of family engagement than those from a working class background (Edwards et al. 2000, p. 450).

A study reported about family factors which potentially put family engagement at risk (Kohl et al. 2000). They studied the effect of parental education level, maternal depression and single parent status on general involvement. Family views of their role as teacher and degree of comfort in communicating with teachers might in part be a reflection of their own education experience. In their exploration of the impact on these factors on engagement, Kohl et al (2000) developed a conception which attempted to go beyond the common 'quantity' models reported and index the quality of involvement. They assessed the degree of parent-teacher contact, extent of family engagement in

school, quality of parent-teacher relationship, teacher's perception of the parent, extent of family engagement at home and family's endorsement of the school. Once again, parental education was a factor, positively related to parent-teacher contact. The more educated the family, the greater engagement in their child's education.

A lack of extended personal educational experience has, argues Kohl et al, (2000) rendered some families lacking in relevant skills or appropriate conception of 'families as co-educator'. A different approach was taken to explain why some families get engaged in their child's education more than others (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). They reviewed psychological theory and related educational research on role construction. Theory in this field attempts to explain how and why we conduct ourselves in various facets (roles) in our lives (e.g. as 'parent' as 'employee'). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggest that families are likely to get involved in their child's education to the extent they see it as part of their role or 'job'. In regard to families in England, Williams et al (2002) found that 2% of families felt the responsibility for education belonged entirely to the school while 58% believed they had at least equal responsibility.

The attribution of responsibility for education is a key factor in shaping family views about what they feel is important, necessary, or even permissible for them to do. Role definitions are complexly shaped by family and cultural experiences and are subject to potential internal conflict (parent as housekeeper/breadwinner/nurse/teacher). Parental role construction in regard to their child's education is not the only determinant of engagement. Their 'sense of personal efficacy' is also implicated. This refers to the degree to which one feels able to make a difference. This in turn depends on a number of related beliefs, attitudes, and skills. Families will be engaged to the degree they see that

supporting and enhancing their child's school achievement is part of their job as a parent. Likewise, families engage to the degree they feel they have capacity to make a difference. People can learn new roles and skills.

The desire and capacity to engage is enhanced or limited to some degree by barriers or opportunities afforded by schools and individual teachers. Family engagement seems to have its major impact on children through the modeling of values and expectations, through encouragement and through interest in and respect for the child-as-learner. Students internalize aspects of family values and expectations as they form an image of themselves as a learner or so called, "educational self schema." These influences are played throughout discussions about and beyond schooling.

Cited research from the 1960s through the 1980s where the argument was made that Mexican parents, particularly those from low socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds, did not value education and are unable to instill this value through academic socialization (Valencia and Black, 2002). Valencia and Black (2002) cited that during the 1960s, minority parents were portrayed as inadequate fathers and mothers because of cultural rearing practices that lead to academic failure (p.82). Today, researchers (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) acknowledge the growing need for partnerships between parents and schools in underserved communities to bolster the academic performance of student populations.

According to Finders and Lewis (1994), there is an institutional perspective that holds that low-income and minority students are not successful in school because parents are often not directly involved in school activities or do not support school goals at home. These researchers convey the importance of research that seeks to evaluate how these

diverse families define their involvement with their children, given their set of circumstances.

### Language and Economic Barriers to Involvement

Mexican immigrant parents face cultural norms and circumstances of low-income that do not align with institutional practices and standards held by schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). School culture often undermines ways diverse parents seek to participate in their children's lives. A difference in language is often cited as one of the main structural barriers that inhibit parents from participating in their children's school activities. It is important to tap into the knowledge and resources each individual possesses as the key to success, as a means to leverage cultural resources diverse parents possess to promote a supportive environment for their children (Osterling, 2001). These resources range from values, principles, story-telling, and language employed by immigrant Mexican parents to promote the education of their children. However, the way these parents promote success and education of their children is often times undercut by the hegemonic and normative standards schools impose as their standards for parent involvement which includes attending school events, going and meeting teachers, or volunteering in the classroom or school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 22).

At the same time, low income immigrant Mexican parents face other structural barriers. The work of Carol Ascher (1988) explores how books, magazines, a corner for study, good nutrition, and other factors conducive to learning are often absent in low-income homes (Ascher, 1988, p.1). At the same time, work obligations prevent poor, single, or working parents, who may be busier or have more troubled households than middle-class parents (Ascher, 1988, p. 3) to be more active in their children's lives

because of time constraints. Little research explores how parent participation differs with parents who face language or work obligations. A study by Appleseed (2006) acknowledges how limited English proficiency, poverty, and varying cultural expectations are amongst the biggest barriers to parent involvement facing low-income, immigrant Mexican parents.

My study attempts to explore barriers to involvement by providing a rich narrative that describes at length the means by which these marginalized parents participate in their students' academic and personal lives and the ways they are engaged.

A study looks at parents with juniors and seniors in high school within the context of conventional parent-involvement activities, such as attending open houses and parent-teacher conferences (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). In addition, it looks at nonconventional parent-involvement activities, such as participating in the Bilingual Preschool Program and the Migrant Education Program which contained parent involvement components aimed at increasing educational opportunities for Spanish speaking students (p.27). This study provides important insights to help bolster parents' ability to deal with children's sexuality, drug, and dropout problems, despite the barriers they face. As Delgado-Gaitan explains, there is a fundamental difference in involvement: The parents expected more instruction and frequent communication from the school, while teachers expected the parents to take more initiative to enquire about their child's progress on a regular basis (Gaitan, 1991, p. 30). Moreover, it is important to underscore how low-income, immigrant Mexican parents encounter difficulties associated with living up to expectations teachers and schools often have of them without taking into consideration circumstances facing this population. My study not only recognizes the constraints



facing these families but narrates how parents leverage cultural knowledge as a means to provide a supportive environment for their children.

### Deficit Framing and Parenting Practices

Much of the literature on disadvantaged or underprivileged minorities cast these populations in a manner that underscores deficiencies as opposed to highlighting strengths. A deficit model is employed to rationalize lack of involvement of low-income minority parents (Valencia & Black, 2002). Deficit thinking suggests that students of disadvantaged circumstances fail in school because they and their families lack certain values, perspectives, or cultural knowledge that prevents the learning process from unfolding. I use the term "disadvantaged" to refer to common ways literature refers to the social background of low-income, immigrant communities. I argue that this is a common misperception held of families from these limited circumstances. I will explore ways background can be an advantage of these parents.

According to Valencia and Black (2002), deficit framing asserts that poor schooling performance of students of color is rooted in students' (alleged) cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held blameless (p.83). Thus, parents are portrayed as inadequate in raising their children to succeed because of these deficit claims. The claim that Mexicans and Mexican Americans do not value education is a result of this thinking, and casts the deficits of the family as responsible for the lack of academic success. Some forces and conditions this theory fails to see are structural barriers that inhibit the participation of Mexican parents in their children's education and cultural differences that shape more informal styles of participation in the home. The

work of Jimenez-Castellanos (2007) cites the discussion of Edward M. Olivios on the duality of parent involvement as it relates to low-income, immigrant Mexican parents. According to the author, Olivios deconstructs and reconstructs bicultural parent involvement and how parents can ultimately empower themselves. Jimenez-Castellanos further describes how literature on parent involvement perceives non-White parents as deficient and suggests that parents should change their behavior in order to positively affect their children's academic outcomes. Olivios argues that student underachievement and low bicultural parent participation are the result of a complex socioeconomic and historic structure of dominance quoted in (Jimenez-Castellanos, 2007, p. 354). This work uses conflict theory to describe inequities created by dominant culture in terms of preferred parenting practices and parent involvement policies of today's school culture.

The work of Joyce Epstein (2005) further describes how No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reflects dominant school culture for formally involving parents in schools. Most of NCLB's attention surrounds requirements for annual academic achievement and quality teachers, but the law also requires schools, districts, and states to organize programs that engage parents in the discussion about achievement and quality schools. Section 1118 on Parental Involvement draws on research to develop practices and structures to include parents in this process. Ultimately, NCLB emphasizes the role parents play in their children's education, as opposed to facilitating processes by which low-income, immigrant Mexican parents have more of an impact on their children's school process. The delineation of process is more important to ethnic and linguistic minorities who are currently not seen as actively involved in their child's education. It is important to point out that while NCLB acknowledges the importance of parent

involvement, the policy embodies the White, middle-class norms of conventional parent involvement (Epstein, 2005). This means that many of those parents who are Spanish monolingual may be left out of the education loop due to the language barrier, or simply because of their socio-economic status, not giving them a choice to partner with a school but rather have to work.

### **School-Based Parent Involvement and its Limitations**

The position of parents in society is shaped by their level of education, job experience, income, and language ability. These factors can constrain or augment parents' ability to become active participants in their children's education. To overcome many of the structural barriers low-income and immigrant families face, the literature suggests parents involved in monitoring their children's homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, and serving as advocates with schools, improve the academic performance of their children despite their circumstances. These formalized school-based activities dominate the discourse surrounding what parents can do to support their children positively in their schooling.

The work of Annette Lareau (2000) conveys the differences between middle-class and working-class and poor by describing ways children are raised, leisure time they have, and boundaries that exist between parents and students. Conventional parenting practices emphasize the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schools. Parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation, rather than with physical force (Lareau, 2003, p.4). These guidelines form a dominant set of accepted forms of parenting which marginalize those parents who do not

adopt these ways. Likewise, these standards and common principles are held by professionals, such as teachers and counselors, and have permeated our society in regards to child rearing and their education in the home.

In addition, Lareau (2000) found that working-class and poor parents are less active in their children's schools than their middle-class counterparts due to differences in the nature of work and family life structure. These families do not capitalize on the social networks that middle-class parents form through their involvement in schools and their children's education. Lareau and Horvat (1999) describe how difficult it is for parents to navigate large school districts that are bureaucratic in nature. According to this research, some parents lack the intellectual sophistication, political drive, or time to even attempt to influence any aspect of their children's schooling (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Thus, cultural capital is employed differently to help some children navigate school, while others are left to negotiate their own school experience. When teachers ask for parent participation and involvement, social class shapes the ways in which parents use resources at their disposal to address teachers concerns for cooperation (Lareau, 2000).

In low-income, immigrant households, Mexican parents face similar challenges with central institutions, such as schools, that promote ideas and strategies about parenting and involvement that do not agree with their cultural and class norms. Thus, for these parents, the way their children are raised at home is out of touch with the standards that schools set forth, alienating these families and their children who are exposed to two different types of class-oriented rearing (Lareau, 2000, p. 3). These guidelines are generally accepted and because they focus on ways parents *should* raise their children, they become part of a dominant set of standards regarding parent involvement practices.

Consequently, cultures and languages of parents that differ from dominant culture are often ignored, denigrated, or at best, treated superficially (De Gaetano, 2007, p. 145).

Therefore, parents who differ from conventional norms set forth by the school are often considered non-participatory in their children's education as judged by the school. Little research addresses how low-income, immigrant Mexican parents embrace their own forms of parent participation that could be considered non-conventional by school standards.

### **Re-Considering Home-Based Forms of Participation**

It is important to understand that school-based forms of parent involvement are out of touch with marginalized communities who demonstrate other culturally relevant forms of participation in the home. Conventional forms of outreach to parents include massive mail-outs or invitations to parents to get involved with a PTA. These recruitment strategies are ineffective as they do not consider other ways Mexican parents are involved at home while working full-time (Osterling, 2001). The study by De Gaetano (2007) emphasizes the active enlistment of Latino parent participation in schools through workshops during a three year study that positively and consistently focused on their own cultures. This study encouraged parents to develop their literacy by attending workshops and working with their children. Latinos studied in the research were primarily Puerto Rican, Dominican, Salvadorian, Colombian, and Ecuadorian students and parents.

Although I agree that family engagement is important to ensure the educational success of low-income, Mexican children, my study attempts to describe the ways in which these families actively participate in school and home settings, without requiring

them to consistently engage directly in school. I iterate that families leverage cultural resources in the home as a means of providing a supportive environment. Thus, these means of family engagement have implications for the educational success of these children in school. However, De Gaetano (2007) makes it clear that enlisting culturally diverse parents in their children's schooling is through a conscious emphasis on their own values, experiences, and way of life (p. 147). I attempt to do this with my study on immigrant Mexican parents and their middle school aged children. Some studies (Lara-Alecio, Irby & Ebener, 1997) demonstrate through interviews with Latina mothers, that parents do in fact value education and hold high expectations of their children, but economic and language barriers prevent them from being involved. Other studies show that when you control for socioeconomic status and length of residency, Latino parents are more involved in school activities than their white counterparts (Terriquez, 2008). In fact, these studies, contrary to popular perception, demonstrate that Latino parents understand the importance of participating in their children's education.

### **Perspectives on Involvement of Immigrant Mexican Families**

Studies (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Valencia & Black, 2002; De Gaetano, 2007) on Mexican parent involvement found other barriers that encourage low levels of involvement. These include differences between educational expectations of parents in the United States and expectations of parents' country of origin, mistrust of large institutions, the negative attitudes of school staff toward Latino parents, and a lack of teachers who speak the native language of parents (p. 146).

The parents own personal schooling experiences can also constitute a barrier to involvement. If parents dropped out of school, they do not feel confident in school

settings (Finders & Lewis, 1994). Limited schooling makes it difficult for these parents to be involved past elementary school, as it is the norm at all levels of schooling to send school work with little instruction as to how parents can help their student. However, De Gaetano (2007) finds that these parents remain active in children's school lives, in different ways. De Gaetano defines home-based involvement as the participation of parents in the home to help their children's learning. This participation includes reading, doing homework, dialoguing about schools, and transmitting spoken messages about the importance of school.

Furthermore she defines formal ways of parent involvement as the work parents do in classroom or in a school setting. This includes teaching to small groups of students, leading discussion, participating in committees, accompanying on field trips or monitoring during lunchtime activities (De Gaetano, 2007, p. 149). Ultimately, the work of De Gaetano serves to further expand the notions of parent involvement for the population I am studying. This definition further helps to expand how I have come to understand the home participation of low-income, immigrant Mexican parents as a process of parenting.

Ramirez (2003) found that some parents were unaware of the functions of daily school life. These parents felt they were out of place at school because they claimed that teachers were better suited to teach and educate their children. In addition, parents in Ramirez's study felt uncomfortable with the expectation of them as parents set forth by school standards. Ramirez argues that it is important to research cultural differences, especially among parents of the same group, since Latino families contain many ethnic groups. Acknowledging cultural and ethnic differences within the Latino population is

important in preventing further social distance between school and home (Ramirez, 2003). My study attempts to delineate those differences by specifically focusing on Mexican parents and families from a home perspective.

According to Osterling (2005), as public education, in particular Latino K-12 education, will continue to deteriorate as demographics keep shifting and more Latinos drop out every year. As Osterling explains, when discussing minority education in the United States, especially Latino education, we tend to overlook the important role that students' families and culture play in the overall learning process (2001, p.5). Given the growing size of Mexican and Mexican American student population in the United States, it is important to address the educational needs of these students by conducting in-depth investigations on how parents play a role in students' lives. My study focuses on involvement and cultural strengths low-income, immigrant Mexican parents bring with them and whether or not their children are cognizant of what their parents do.

### **A Different Outlook on Home-Based Participation as Family Engagement**

Research on involvement of Mexican parents in education suggests that transmission of socio-cultural values should be added to expand traditional conceptions of parent involvement. Gerardo Lopez (2001), finds that traditional definitions of parent involvement exclude ways in which migrant workers are involved with their children's education. The family he studied, the Padillas, provides evidence of involvement and contributions to their children's achievement in non-traditional ways. For the Padillas, their goal was to teach their children to appreciate the value of their education through the medium of hard work (p. 420). In order to do this, the Padillas took their children to work with them in the fields and constantly reminded them of the importance of hard



work. The Padillas also pointed out that opportunities to advance oneself were created by education. Essentially, the Padillas gave their children a choice to either work hard at school or work hard in the fields (p.420). The values and teachings that the Padillas instilled in their children were their way of being informally involved in the children's education. Thus, included in the many definitions of parent involvement is now added the "transmission of socio-cultural values" (Lopez, 2001, p.430).

According to Valencia and Black (2002), there are two ways Mexican parents are involved in children's education: through external involvement in the school itself and internal involvement through home activities. As mentioned before, schools tend to stress external involvement at the school itself, while Mexican parents understand the importance of participating in their child's education in the home. Valencia and Black argue that home behaviors have been studied little but are critically important to understand the attitudes Mexican parents have towards the value of education (2002, p. 96).

### **Summary**

A preponderance of the research links academic achievement to parent involvement. Parental effort appears to have a strong effect on student achievement and different types of parental effort, for example dinnertime discussions versus volunteering, exert different impacts on achievement. Not all parental effort measures behave identically (Houtenville & Conway, 2008). Schools must move beyond a belief that any parent involvement activity will produce important results, rather, they need to develop parent involvement programs that are goal-oriented and subject-specific (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).



## CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

### Introduction to the Research Study

In my study I used qualitative, constructivist grounded theory research design and analysis to explore how Mexican immigrant parents contributed towards raising student achievement, while making meaning of their engagement in schools. I applied three methods of data collection, interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. My study looked at family engagement activities and conditions that influenced those activities at home, in the community and at school. The first part of this chapter, I began by providing a rationale for using qualitative research as my mode of inquiry followed by a brief history of grounded theory methodology including its philosophical and theoretical layers. I then contrasted the three different versions of grounded theory methodology, including an accounting of Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory methodology, which I employed in this study.

Later in this chapter, beginning with the section entitled Sampling Research Participants, I described how my research unfolded, and revisited several elements described in the first part of this chapter, to look in greater detail at what I think may happen as they are implemented, and choices I will need to make once the study is under way.

### Research Questions

The main research question and three sub-questions that will support and direct this research study are:

- Research Question: *How do Mexican immigrant families engage with their children, schools, and community for the purpose of raising student achievement?*
  - Research Subquestions:
    - *What unique meaning do Mexican immigrant families make of their engagement in schools?*
    - *What do immigrant Mexican parents and their children identify as helpful and limiting to their relationship with schools?*

This chapter describes the research design that will be used to answer the research question and sub-question above.

I looked at family engagement from the perspective of immigrant Mexican parents in order to explain conditions influencing parents' efforts to be engaged in their children's education and to negotiate expectations (their own and others') of schooling in the United States. From this perspective, I also discussed what schools and communities do to improve the relationship to better serve the needs of these parents and their children. In addition, I want to continue to study the culture of Mexican immigrant parents to understand the meaning parents make of their engagement in schools by immersing in the culture as an active participant.

While this study focuses on immigrant Mexican families in a high-poverty urban neighborhood, it unfolds against the backdrop of a state education system and its educators, a school that is linguistically and culturally diverse, but with various differences from the participants in this study. These differences of language to cultural

practices may have implications for communication between school personnel and immigrant Mexican parents about family engagement, and for parents' sense of welcome in a school community. The prevailing national debate about immigration status and policies in the US is exacerbating an already complicated relationship between immigrant Mexican families and the institution of school, overshadowing attention to daily life, including the parents' role in their children's education. This study is important because it makes space for a defined look at family engagement, from the parents' point of view, at the actual experiences and practices of immigrant Mexican families who are supporting their children's learning.

### **Philosophy of Research**

My research question examined the relationships between home and school including the personal experiences of Mexican immigrant families and public education. Given these questions, my research paradigm is constructivist because the paradigm's central purpose is to make sense of human experiences and to understand and derive shared meaning within a particular context, (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010, p. 15) in this study, personal experiences of Mexican nationals as they engage in their children's education.

Being fully emergent is the most appropriate paradigm to guide my actions as I conduct this research because the basic tenets of constructivism include understanding the experiences of individuals in the context of their lives, exploring the meaning of phenomenon within the context of a research study, and listening to multiple participant voices and experiences (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010), all of which are key components needed to address my research question. Constructivists believe that "the

knowable world is that of the meaning attributed by individualsö (Corbetta, 2003, p. 24). Further, constructivists assume that there are many possible interpretations of the same data, all of which potentially meaningful (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). These assumptions resonate with me. Through my research questions, I learned about the contributions Mexican immigrant families made that impacted school reform and the meanings they made of their engagement. Based on my research question and my beliefs about the best way to conduct my study in order to explore this research question, the following is a constellation of research beliefs and practices ó ña basic set of beliefs that guide actioní taken in connection with a disciplined inquiryö (Guba, 1992, p. 17).

Constructivism became noticeable in the U.S. with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1967 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann argue that all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted common sense knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from a socio-cultural frame. When people interact, they do so with the understanding that their respective perceptions of reality are related, and as they act upon this understanding their common knowledge of reality becomes reinforced. Since this common sense knowledge is negotiated by people, human typifications, significations, and institutions come to be presented as part of an objective reality, particularly for future generations who were not involved in the original process of negotiation. For example, as parents negotiate rules for their children to follow, those rules confront the children as externally produced õgivensö they cannot change. Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism has its roots in phenomenology.

### **Emergent Format of Research Design and Lens**

The emergent format for carrying out my research involved suspending judgment as to the core set of aims, key research questions, and nature of data to be collected (Blumer, 1969). In short, through a process of critical reflection the research design emerged, shaped by researcher's engagement with the broad scene of research under study. Writing up the research process thus reflected this process of emergence.

According to Mead and Blumer in one sense this approach is riskier than the traditional format. But it is also more exciting, more creative and more likely to provide results and findings that are closer to lived experience and the realities of the social scene being researched.

Emergent formats are appropriate for those perspectives where theory emerges from engagement with the scene of study as in symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934, Blumer 1969), phenomenology (Schutz 1976), and the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and its later developments (e.g., Strauss and Corbin 1998) or constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). It is appropriate for research undertaken by professionals (e.g., business, teachers, health professionals, police, social workers and so on) who critically reflect upon their own practice in order to improve their understanding, decision making, and action as in action research. Democratic forms of evaluation also will take on an emergent format (Schostak, 2002). More specifically, there are radical qualitative research methods that draw upon deconstructive strategies to develop the potential of emergent frameworks for the inclusion of multiple viewpoints (Schostak 2006, Schostak and Schostak 2008).

According to Glaser (2001) constructivist grounded theory is a misnomer.

Grounded theory can use any data; it remains to be figured out what it is. In his book *The Grounded Theory Perspective* (Glaser, 2001) Glaser wrote a chapter (11) that dealt with *“all is data.”*

He said: *“All is data and it means exactly what is going on in the research, regardless of the source, whether interview, observations, documents, in whatever combination. It is not only what is being told, how it is being told and the conditions of its being told, but also all the data surrounding what is being told. It means what is going on must be figured out exactly what it is to be used for, that is conceptualization, not for accurate description. Data is always as good as far as it goes, and there is always more data to keep correcting the categories with more relevant properties.”* (p.145)

In essence, designing and conducting research from an emergent constructivist philosophy allows me to *“see what is there”* rather than to *“test”* for one or more hypothesis. It means to design open ended interview questions, observations and even surveys rather than closed ended *“yes/no”* questions. I plan on analyzing with an openness to what is there rather than for what I think might be there or wish to be there, including what the literature says will be there. Lastly, it means to remain open to redesigning the study to some extent as my understanding emerges. Constructivism is the most appropriate paradigm to guide my actions as I conduct this research because the basic tenets of constructivists include understanding the experiences of individuals in the context of a research study, and listening to multiple participant voices and experiences (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010), all of which are key components needed to address



my research question. Constructivists believe that "the knowable world is that of the meaning attributed by individuals" (Corbetta, 2003, p. 24).

Through my research questions, I learned about the contributions Mexican immigrant families make that impact student achievement through their stories of engagement in schools, home and/or the community.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

I am a native Nuevo Mexicano born in New Mexico and raised in México as a child and later returned to the United States at the age of 7. I was raised by a "nortehña" mother also known as a Chicana from Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico, and a father from Chihuahua, México. I consider myself "Mexicano" with the ability to read, write, and speak two languages (English and Spanish), including understanding of two different dialects of the Spanish language. This language ability is a gift to have, which I utilize daily as an educator, especially when working with a diverse population of Mexicanos, Latinos, Hispanos, Chicanos, and other cultures.

I am currently an Assistant Superintendent of a school district in a Southwestern city of the United States and also a preacher of the Iglesia de Cristo (Church of Christ). I consider myself an "insider" for three reasons. First, I am a fluent Spanish speaker; second, I have lived within 3 miles of this urban public school community for more than 20 years, including attending similar urban public schools as a child with similar demographics; third, I congregate with many people from México on weekly bases who attend community and faith based organizations. For these reasons, I found it easier to recruit parents and develop focus groups for my study. However, in the most literal sense, I also consider myself an "outsider" due to not being a parent, not being a native

born from Mexico, and since I am not the principal of the middle school I mentioned in my study. Even at my former home school, because I was the principal, I remain somewhat of an outsider with some parents, especially those who have not partnered with the school in the past, which may be due to fear or possibly intimidation. This may have included those parents who did come into the school, but may have told me what I wanted to hear due to this same fear, intimidation and/or respect.

There is a growing body of literature around issues of positionality. Many researchers have discovered there is no substitute for actual fieldwork where these issues are personally encountered in sometimes unanticipated and often subtle ways. For example, the research of Van Maanen (1988), leads towards exploring issues of power and positionality within one's own culture and across cultural boundaries. He states that depending on insider/outsider status, the more one is like the participants in terms of culture, gender, race, socio-economic class, and so on the more it is assumed that access to interviews and observations will be granted meanings shared, and validity of findings assured (Maanen, 1988). On the other hand, Johnson-Bailey (1999) challenged this finding and examined the assumption of access, power relationships, and commonality of experience. Johnson-Bailey (1999) assumed, that there would be an immediate bond of sisterhood between a black woman and another black woman during an interview. This she found to be generally true for race and gender, but a more complicated scenario emerged with regard to class and color.

Pike (1967) and Harris (1976) have argued that cultural insiders and outsiders are capable of producing either emic (subjective/insider) or etic (objective/outsider) accounts of their culture. I consciously chose to design my study using two public middle schools,

one where I am the principal and one that I am not, to provide me with aspects of both emic and etic perspectives. Nonetheless, even with careful self-monitoring, I understand that I will still not be providing a true, totally etic description of my data because of my positionality as a principal who has experienced family engagement (Creswell, 1998).

**Figure 3: Research Outline Map**



**Mode of Inquiry**

Many scholars have dedicated years of research to seek answers to questions about culture and meaning. Many of these researchers found experimental and quantitative methods to be insufficient in explaining the phenomenon they wished to study. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). In this mode, the researcher explores relationships using textual and perhaps non-textual visual data, rather than predominately

quantitative/numerical data. The ability of qualitative data to provide richer, more evocative description of a phenomenon through textual data is an important consideration not only from the researcher's perspective, but for the consumer of research as well.

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) "if you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it" (p. 120). These characteristics are critical components to my study. The rich detailed stories of the qualitative research process will hold as a strong foundation of my study.

Shank (2002) defines qualitative research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" (p. 5). By *systematic* he means "planned, ordered and public," following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By *empirical*, he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience. Inquiry into meaning is when researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience.

I believe qualitative research is a method of inquiry employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences, but also in market research and other contexts. Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. The qualitative method investigates the *why* and *how* of decision making, not just *what*, *where*, *when*. However, for purposes of my research study, which endeavors to explore the relationship between home and school and the personal contributions of Mexican immigrant families who have one or more children enrolled at the designated middle schools. I believe a qualitative mode of inquiry is very appropriate and will be very helpful to my study because of its grounded structure that invites the researcher to make connections to the world of experience

(Shank, 2002) and will lead me to try to make sense of individual experiences.

Qualitative mode of inquiry sets a positive, naturalistic approach when questioning participants rather than using a deficit analysis approach which could invite fear or distress when asking parents about engagement in their child's education. However, if extreme emotions so emerge, I will be prepared to offer empathy, time to process emotions, and any other support necessary.

### **Sites of Study**

I have selected an urban middle school located in a Southwestern state of the United States; located in the center of the city considered a county boundary. Although, there are similar schools that share a number of characteristics as this one, each institution has some significant differences. After considering a number of potential schools to study, I selected this school partly for the unique demographics and academic challenges it faces, and partly due to the degree of willingness on the part of the school and community members to participate in my research. In that sense, this site comprises a convenience sample; however, my sample is also a purposeful one because the active participants will be invited and given the option to take part in the study. The middle school has more than 90 % Hispanic students and is considered 100% free lunch, including a third of the student population being English language learners.

The school site is part of a large urban district considered to be the 33<sup>rd</sup> largest school district in the United States with a student population of more than 90,000. This school district is in the center of a large metropolitan city in Southwestern United States and is considered to be the 34<sup>th</sup> largest city in the United States. This metropolitan area boasts a population of nearly 900,000. Lobo Middle School (school name given to

protect the identity of the school and constituents), is a large comprehensive urban public school with a diverse community of people and cultures. The following Table offers a more in depth representation of the school's demographics:

**Table 1: School Demographics**

**Lobo Middle School**

653 students in grades 6-8<sup>th</sup>

98.5% attendance rate

222 English Language Learners

622 Hispanics enrolled

650 Economically Disadvantaged enrolled

School Designation: Restructuring Year 2

(Meaning: in need of improvement)

Source: Public Education Department's School Accountability Report 2011-12

**Methodology**

For this study, I planned to use aspects of a grounded theory methodology. I combined the interactionist aspects of theory building from qualitative data in grounded theory methodology and focused on meaning making and culture to develop deep understanding of Mexican Immigrant family engagement with schools and their children's education.

### Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory is an inductive method of generating theory that is grounded in individuals' experiences and social relations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This methodology will be helpful to my study since I will carefully listen to experiences from the sample group of Mexican families as they encounter the school system and deal with the education of their children on a daily basis. This will allow me to gain inside knowledge of what types of social relationships families are engaged in and their interaction with this educational institution.

Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory as an analytical approach by which theory might be developed in the absence of a priori conceptual frameworks or hypotheses (1967). Classical grounded theory research was a countermeasure to the field of sociology's almost singular focus on providing (or disproving) existing theories, avoiding "the opportunistic use of theories that have dubious fit and working capacity" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4). Although an exhaustive discussion of the history of grounded theory is beyond the scope of this study, it is instructive to consider several versions of grounded theory that differ from one another in their epistemological and ontological stances.

### Symbolic Interactionism

To understand the grounded theory methodology underlying this study, an understanding of symbolic interactionism is essential. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes "the symbolic nature of social life, studied initially from the micro-social perspective of human actors involved in symbolically defining their situations, their selves, and their roles in social interactions" (MacDonald, 2001, p. 116-117). Symbolic

interactionism posited humans as acting in and on the world in which they live, rather than merely existing as passive beings being acted upon by societal structures (e.g., economy and culture) that exert influence on a macro-social level. These activities are based on the meanings that humans make of their own world, including meanings that are interpreted through ongoing micro-social interactions. As symbolic interactionists, we have developed an empirical tradition that bridges theory and method and weaves concepts and data. We study interpretation, interaction, action, structure and process in natural settings with real human beings. We enter our respondents' intersubjective worlds and develop relationships with them rather than simply write about them (Charmaz, 1995a, pp. 49-50). I planned on using grounded theory as an analytical approach to my study to further investigate the contributions Mexican immigrant families made in raising student achievement and the unique meaning they made of their engagement. I developed positive relationships with them and utilized a symbolic interactionism approach to gain insight on how they lived, think and acted in respect with the United States school system.

#### Methods Common to Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory, in all of its forms, is an inductive method of theory development (Glasser & Strauss, 1967, p. 114). It is both a methodology that is epistemologically steeped in symbolic interactionism, and a method that employs a set of techniques to study social processes and variation within those processes (Milliken & Schreiber, 2001, p. 181-182). A grounded theory methodology involves constructing theory that is based on data collection, not influenced by pre-existing theories. Developing new theory that is grounded in data (rather than using data only to verify



theory) makes room for "discovering novelty and potentially illuminating perspectives," and recasts the researcher's task, challenging him or her to be "constantly alert to emergent perspectives that will change and help develop the theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 40).

Grounded theory method is an interactive process of data collection, analysis, and theory testing. Grounded theory researchers "blur and intertwine coding, data collection and data analysis, from the beginning of the investigation until near its end" (Glaser & Strauss, 1966, p. 288), rather than approaching these research activities in discreet steps separated by time.

Grounded theory has evolved in at least two important ways since its original inception by Glaser and Strauss. First, Strauss and his research partner Juliet Corbin, declared that grounded theory researchers could employ an existing paradigm, or analytic stance, during the interactive process of data gathering, coding, and analysis, in order to better integrate the structure and process of building a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). This is a change from the original conception of grounded theory analysis, in which the researcher forestalls any consideration of a paradigm or analytic framework in favor of waiting until a unified theory emerges (giving less attention to how the process of theory-building and the structure of the theory cohere).

Glaser was outraged by this change in the original conception of grounded theory analysis. He contended that using a paradigm to organize data analysis was foreclosing the researcher's practice of remaining objective by ignoring the influence of pre-existing theory, in order to allow theory to emerge from the data themselves. Glaser, comparing

Strauss & Corbin's conception of grounded theory with the original, stated they were "very different, the first focusing on force [the data] and the second on emergence, first by keeping all of the problems of forcing data, the second giving them up in favor of emergence, discovery, and inductive theory generation" (Glaser, 1992, p. 122). He claims the result of Strauss & Corbin's new method was a descriptive analysis of data categories rather than a grounded theory (Kendall, 1999). For the purpose of my study, I plan on utilizing grounded theory paradigm, in order to allow theory to emerge from the data itself. However, I will do this through the interaction between myself as the researcher and the participants that reality of the phenomenon under study is discovered and made meaningful (Charmaz, 2000, p. 523-524).

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology**

Another, arguably more important change in the conceptualization of grounded theory methodology was the development of "constructivist" grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz differentiated constructivist grounded theory from the conceptualizations of both Glaser & Strauss, and Strauss & Corbin in three important ways. First, constructivist grounded theory challenged assumptions about the researchers' ability to be objective. Charmaz asserted that researchers cannot be objective, cannot separate themselves from their "worldview, disciplinary assumptions, theoretical proclivities, and research interests" because those necessarily "sensitize them to look for certain issues and processes in their data" (1995c, p. 32). She viewed "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1969), as a key component in grounded theory research, both in terms of what they contribute to the researchers' relationship with participants and their joint negotiations of meaning; as well as what they contribute as points of

departure for further field observations and interviews with participants during the research process (p.32). In my study, I plan on not separating myself from my personal worldview, assumptions, or research interests to avoid looking at specific issues and processes in my data once collected.

Second, Charmaz asserted that it is through the interaction between the researcher and the research participants that reality of phenomenon under study is discovered and made meaningful (Charmaz, 2000).

Charmaz does not see the researcher as someone who undertakes interpretation and meaning-making as a distanced expert self. Rather, data interpretation springs from the participants' point of view, which the researcher considers along with his or her own. "The interaction between researcher and researched produces the data, and therefore meanings the researcher observes and defines" (Charmaz 1995c, p. 35). The researcher's interpretation "may not exactly replicate what participants view as going on because [the researcher] brings different perspectives and concerns to it" (Charmaz, 1995c, p. 34). This methodological element is important to my study because the data I will collect from research participants will allow me to produce interpretations leading to meaningful outcomes and findings.

The third main factor differentiating constructivist grounded theory and classical grounded theory methodology is the ontological perspective to which each ascribes. A practical person ontological perspective can be seen in the classic grounded theory of Glaser & Strauss in that it assumes that reality is external and discoverable through grounded theory analysis. Charmaz agrees that it is the researcher's responsibility to

define the reality of the phenomenon under study, and that reality is external and may be discoverable through grounded theory analysis. However, she asserts that reality may or may not stay the same, in essence making a distinction between the real and the true (Charmaz, 2000, p. 523). She contends that reality is not objective, but, rather, is social and "does not exist independent of human action" (Charmaz 2000, p. 521), and it is negotiated as a result of "the interaction between the researcher and the participants and temporal, cultural and structural contexts in which they find themselves" (p. 524). In my study, I will differentiate constructivist grounded theory through social interactions I have during participant interviews, observations, and focus groups. These interactions will be led by a cultural and structural context.

### **Data Collection Methods**

At this stage of my research design, it is important to note that due to the nature of qualitative research, I observed and interpreted meanings found in the data as they emerged. Therefore, as my research progressed the design evolved and slightly modified my techniques that maximized my understanding of the study phenomena (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010). Due to this reality, it is neither possible nor desirable to finalize my exact research strategies before data collection has begun (Patton, 1990); however I will outline my general plans for data collection strategies that are congruent within a constructivist research paradigm.

Adhering to my study, I employed three methods of data collection: semi-structured open-ended individual interviews, participant observations and focus groups that represented participants from the school community site. During the individual interviews, I asked the same overarching questions (see Appendix A for a list of the

questions) at both meetings of individual interviews. Second, during observations, I recorded formal and informal behaviors of the participants (See Appendix D) during a school or home activity in relation to education. Third, I participated in focus group discussions and initiatives. In addition, I employed prompts and probes designed to elicit further detail and/or encourage interviewees to elaborate on the initial answer. The prompts varied, as appropriate, from interview to interview. The data gathered using these methods provided the description that can be found in personal reflections as well as in field notes and documents produced while conducting observations during parent engagement activities and/or home-school gatherings including focus group articulation meetings.

#### Individual Interviews

To explore my research question and sub-question, I interviewed 10 or more Mexican immigrant parents in a scheduled interview session from the one middle school (See Appendix B and C for a list of the interview questions). All interviews were audio recorded with the parent's consent to transcribe the stories and responses each one was willing to share. I chose this number of participants to gain a wide range of perspectives of family engagement in schools, while learning about the meaning they made of this engagement.

Interviews are a very common method in qualitative research. Bernard (1988) describes interview techniques as being structured or unstructured to various degrees. He states that there are informal types of interviewing including unstructured interviews that have some focus. Bernard (1988) believes in semi-structured interviewing and structured interviews, typically involving what he calls an interview schedule, while other

researchers may call interview protocols, that is, sets of questions, or scripts. Fontana and Frey (1994) expand this classification scheme by noting that interviews may be conducted individually or in groups, often called focus groups. Again, exemplifying modern trends in qualitative research, these authors add that unstructured interviews may include oral histories and creative and postmodern interviewing; the latter which may include use of visual media and polyphonic interviewing, that is, almost verbatim reporting of respondents' words, as well as gendered interviewing in response to feminist concerns.

I conducted interviews wherever participants chose and felt more comfortable. This was either at their home, classrooms, or school/community locations such as a meeting room of a public library, which afforded greater comfort, trust, and relational interaction including privacy that conducted the interviews out of earshot of others. The consideration of participants' privacy was very important to me in order to maintain a positive relationship with the research participant. The research participant felt at ease to know that his or her responses and contributions to the study were kept confidential and pseudonyms were used to guarantee that personal identities were not revealed.

A qualitative research interview seeks to describe meanings of central themes in the life world of subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what interviewees say (Kvale, 1996). In my study, I wanted to know what unique meaning Mexican immigrant families made of their engagement in schools. I believe that through the interview process a form of conversation began, in which I was able to gather data that addressed the study's goals and questions. A researcher, particularly one who

will be in the setting for a considerable period of time or one doing participant observations, may choose to conduct a series of relatively unstructured interviews that seem more like conversations with the respondents. Topics were discussed and explored in a somewhat loose but probing manner. The researcher in some cases returned a second time as needed to continue to interview the respondents in more depth, for instance to focus on questions further or to triangulate with other data. In preparation to the follow-up interviews, I asked participants to write down their ideas, feelings, and stories as they remembered. I also asked interviewees to bring any documents or artifacts that they felt were important with them to the follow-up interview.

In contrast, structured interviews were conducted in which the researcher followed a sort of script of questions, asking the same questions, and in the same order, of all respondents. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) consider these to be surveys, while other authors do not make this distinction, and some consider surveys and questionnaires to be instruments respondents complete on their own without an interview. I used a combination of structured and semi-structured interview approaches. I asked the same questions but with a follow-up probing question when necessary to focus a respondent, got them to offer examples, or tell a story, including defining or clarifying. This type of semi-structured approach was best for my study so that participants felt valued and appreciated for whatever they contributed to the study.

Interviews or a series of interviews may focus on aspects of a respondent's life and represent a standard technique in anthropology for understanding aspects of culture from an insider's view.

Guidelines for conducting interviews are relatively straight forward if one considers that both the researcher, as data-gathering instrument, and the respondents are human beings with their various strengths and weaknesses at communicating. The key is to be sure that one truly listens to respondents and records what they say, rather than to the researcher's perceptions or interpretations. This is a good rule of thumb in qualitative research in general. It is best to maintain the integrity of raw data, using respondents' words, including quotes liberally. Yet it is also important for researchers to focus participants on the area of study and to probe for deeper meaning, clarity, examples and stories. Most researchers, as a study progresses, also maintain field notes that contain interpretations of patterns found while interviewing, to be refined and investigated on an ongoing basis. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) summarize these ideas:

Good interviews are those in which the subjects are at ease and talk freely about their points of view. Good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents' perspectives (p. 97). I plan on recording the two initial interviews to support my findings.

#### Participant Observations

Participant observational studies are a form of qualitative method in which the researcher goes in directly to the subject's environment and records his or her formal or informal observations (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Measor, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Spradley, 1980) of the subject's behavior, context, and/or physical artifacts. An example of this type of research is entering a classroom to study the behavior of students. This type of research has the advantage that researchers can observe naturally occurring behaviors as in addition to individuals' reflections of their own behavior (Hui & Triandis,



1989). Observational research is often accompanied by records of the experience that can later be analyzed by other researchers. In essence, observational studies can lead to cross cultural qualitative literature research studies (Jackson & Niblo, 2003).

The second method I used is participant observations, which were part of my study to deepen my understanding about participant's behavior(s) in specific settings, such as, home, school, and community. I conducted 4 observations at each setting over a full semester. The observation settings as mentioned above were done during school activities, workshops, trainings, and meetings, including community events sponsored by the school. I chose the observations by consulting with the Associate Superintendent to obtain a copy of the school's master calendar, Title I parent policy, and the Educational Plan for Student Success (EPSS) that will have school goals and scheduled family meetings and events for the 2012-2013 school year.

In my study, I used an observation tool (See Appendix E) for the 4 observations and I was completely emergent. The observation tool allowed me to take field notes and check off behaviors that I observed in the home, school or community setting that led me to the type of parent participation and level of engagement.

### Focus Groups

The third method I used is focus groups. I facilitated and led each focus group, a process that entails systematically and simultaneously asking questions of multiple participants (Fontana, 2002). I conducted focus group interviews with three different sets of parents composed of 7 to 9 participants who were immigrant Mexican parents of a child attending the identified middle school. Keeping the numbers within my focus groups small was essential to ensure that each participant had the opportunity to express

opinions (Greenbaum, 1998). The small number of interviewees in each focus group enabled me to encourage all participants to talk and monitor individuals who dominated the conversation (Creswell, 1998, p. 124).

Focus groups have been used increasingly in social studies research since the 1980s. This qualitative research method responds to concerns about a) the control that the researcher exerts during one-on-one interviews, b) the influence the researcher's framework may have on the interviewee, and c) the limitations that close-ended questions in survey research imposes on participants. Less directed methods, such as focus group interviews may be more appropriate to elicit responses that better [reflect] the social reality of the interviewee (Madriz, 2000, pp. 837). For Latina women in particular, sharing information within a group is common and familiar (Madriz, 2000, p. 842), reflecting the cultural priorities of family and community as well as collaborative learning practices (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987).

I posed semi-structured, open ended questions to focus group participants (see Appendix F called Focus Group Guide) and facilitated the most diverse range of responses while audio recording the conversations.

Postmodernists, especially feminist scholars, see the value of focus groups as a means of portraying the daily experience of women as it is familiar to them, resulting in a lesser power differential between researcher and focus group participants. "Group interviews are particularly suited for uncovering women's daily experiences through collective stories and resistance narratives" that reflect the different dimensions of power and domination that frame women's quotidian experiences (Madriz, 2000, p.

839). I believe that additional data gathered from focus groups at the identified school and community site will confirm and further enhance my research findings.

### **Sampling of Research Participants**

The target population of this study is Spanish-speaking individuals in the United States from Mexico who are immigrant parents or guardians of children attending the identified urban public middle school in a Southwestern state of the United States. The research sample in this study included 10 individual interviews conducted twice as needed, three focus groups of seven to nine participants in each group. In addition, I conducted 4 observations, one at the school, one within the community, and two at homes, which provided a more in-depth study during the entire semester of data collection.

My familiarity with many cities and pueblos in Mexico, ability to speak, read and write Spanish, and my employment as a former principal in an urban public middle school set the stage for conversations with immigrant Mexican parents about the education of their children. I was very optimistic that these conversations led and indeed informed the formal activities of the investigation.

Important cultural and linguistic differences exist across the country of Mexico from which my study participants come. I do not wish to imply that I assume the experiences and language dialects of all participants of this study to be the same. However, in my experience with families from various Mexican regions, I found that each person speaks to his or her own individual heritage, they nonetheless speak of themselves as a collective ó a common group ó when discussing their interactions as

parents with school personnel (either referring to themselves as "Mexicanos" or "Latinos" or both interchangeably).

Recruitment of core sample will entail the use of two different strategies that will unfold simultaneously. The first strategy was to recruit parents who already attended the weekly and monthly meetings that were scheduled for the year. Another recruitment strategy was to ask participants to recruit members they knew from the target population. This entailed asking those already recruited to link me to other possible participants, a technique known as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a technique commonly used to link a researcher with members of a hard-to-reach or hidden populations. Criticisms to snowball sampling include the possibility of a) an overly homogenous sample occurring because current recruits are likely to know and link the researcher to like-minded peers, and b) an exclusionary sample occurring when current recruits act as gatekeepers, omitting possible recruits because of personal reasons, for example (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). In spite of the possible limitations, I decided to pursue snowball sampling because I felt it allowed me to a better and more trusted (by parents) recruitment link than I attained on my own through public advertising. I didn't want any of the participants to feel uneasy or in any way threatened during this study. There must be warm responsive interactions between staff members and children, including their parents (Aos, Lien, Mayfield, Miller, & Pernucci, 2004).

#### Maximum Variation of the Core Sample

My goal was to sample participants who represented as much variation as possible within the boundaries of certain parameters that were shared by participants: being immigrant parents from Mexico, their children currently attending an urban public

school, and the children receiving free or reduced lunch (a common indicator of low income). Additionally, the recruitment information supported this study as to the investigation on how immigrant Mexican parents support their children's learning, thus indicated that participants saw themselves as parents who support their children's learning, making this another homogenous parameter.

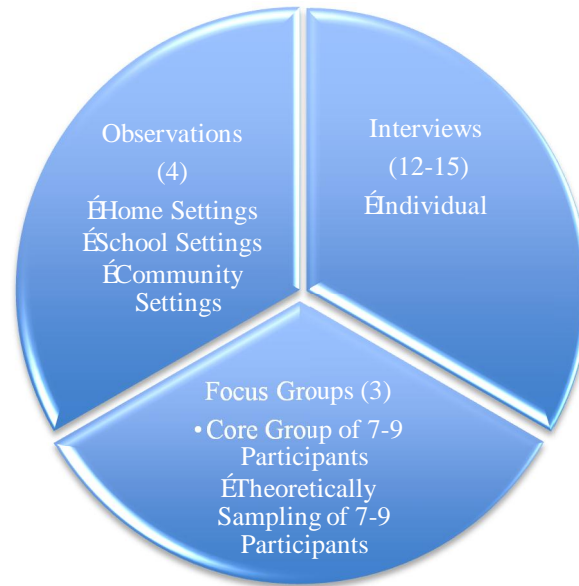
Sandelowski (1995) espoused practicing both "homogenous and maximum variation sampling [in which] person-related homogeneity is maintained while variety in the target phenomenon is sought" (p. 181). This serves to avoid problems of representation, which occur when person-related characteristics, such as race or culture, are represented by only one or two people in a sample. At the same time, it will help to highlight whether "a variable, [such as level of educational attainment] is important in understanding the phenomenon" (p. 181). To this end, I intend to seek maximum variation in the characteristics of the parents themselves related to gender, age, country of origin, time in the US, urban neighborhood, child and participant's level of educational attainment, and whether living with spouse including marital status.

### **Data Analysis**

Charmaz (1995c) delineated three main iterative steps for a constructivist grounded theory investigation: collection of data, coding data, and memo-writing. There are several key analytic strategies with grounded theory. The first one I intend to use is coding. Coding is a process for both categorizing qualitative data and for describing the implications and details of these categories. Initially one does *open coding*, considering the data in minute detail while developing some initial categories. Later, one moves to more *selective coding* where one systematically codes with respect to a core concept. For

the purpose of this study, I will use selective coding during my interviews, observations and focus groups. The second strategy I will use is memoing. *Memoing* is a process for recording the thoughts and ideas of the researcher as they evolve throughout the study focusing on the core concept.

In the Data Collection section I created a timeline to collect my data throughout the proposed study. My goal was that I began the data collection by collecting extensive field notes, during the observation periods. Participant observations included observing families, participating in home, school and/or community settings. I was also more emergent, allowing parents to take the lead in the conversations as I actively listened and audio recorded the stories and conversations during the interview process. The goal was to capture how parents felt during these events and their thoughts that led me to my findings. Next, I planned on conducting focus group interviews, with the core sample participants, which I was hopeful would generate more data to inform the study. The data analysis component began concurrently with the interviews. Theoretical sampling, a special feature of grounded theory, led me to further data collection and concurrent data analysis until I reached the point of "theoretical saturation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136).

**Figure 4: Process for Collecting and Analyzing Data**

### **Coding Data**

Coding and categorizing are practices of synthesizing the meaning of participants' words into more briefly stated concepts. Memo writing is the "intermediate step" en route to fully realized theoretical analysis (Charmaz 1995c, p. 42); an opportunity to both examine those concepts individually, and to uncover "implicit, unstated and condensed meanings" and relationships that only become apparent when considered at a higher conceptual level than line-by-line coding (p. 43). Charmaz (1990, 1995c) recommends two levels of coding in grounded theory studies, line-by-line coding and focused coding.

#### Line-by-line Coding

This first level of coding entails looking at data line by line to establish an initial coding scheme. This keeps researchers close to their data, pinpoints gaps and leads that

focus future data collection (Charmaz 2000, p. 515), ensuring that analysis occurs "from the ground up" (Charmaz 1995c, p. 35). Such an approach to coding helps researchers avoid moving too quickly to overarching conceptual or metaphoric explanations of the data, and from "imposing extant theories or our own beliefs on the data" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 515). Line-by-line coding may be accomplished most easily by numbering each line and engaging the help of one or more coding partners in order to talk through trends across interviews as well as within interviews and tease out possible meanings of negative cases. However, in this study I will be the sole investigator and will do all the coding myself. This will be a comfortable task for me to code in Spanish since I understand the Spanish language and will have heard participants' responses firsthand in their native language.

#### Focused Coding

Researchers use focused coding in order to "create and try out categories for capturing 'data'" (Charmaz, 1995c, p. 38). Focused codes should be brief and active, while remaining true to the data (p. 39). Charmaz delineated two approaches to focused coding that I intend to use throughout my study. The first approach, action coding, was the practice of defining codes that contain a present progressive (-ing form) verb, in order to frame the analysis as insights about "what people are doing, what is happening in the setting." Action codes are particularly useful for making comparative analyses between a) data from different people, b) different data from the same person at different times, c) incidents, and d) data and categories that have already been defined earlier in the study (p. 515).

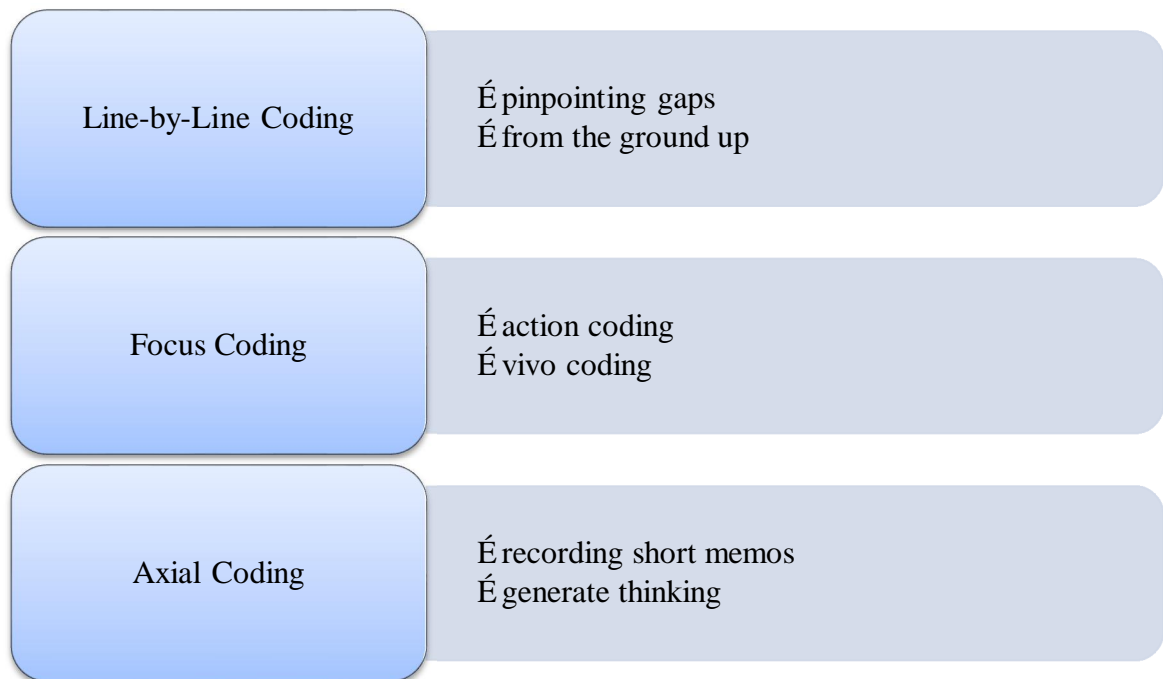


The second code that I intended to use is in vivo coding as a process. In vivo coding entails creating codes that use the actual words of the participants. This practice reinforces the researcher’s effort to help maintain a close connection between the emerging theory grounded and the participant’s discourse (p. 39). In vivo coding is desirable in all levels of coding, including line-by-line and focused coding.

Axial Coding

Axial coding is identified by Corbin and Strauss (1998, p. 230), which captures, for example, variations within categories and hierarchies within and between categories. In order to “unload” this type of thinking I recorded short memos in writing right on the transcript page of the text that generated the thinking.

**Figure 5: Process of Coding Data**



### Research Quality

Numerous frameworks have been developed to evaluate the rigor or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and strategies for establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability have been extensively written about across fields (Krefting, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993). General guidelines for critically appraising qualitative research have also been published (Forchuk & Roberts, 1993; Mays & Pope, 2000).

I applied rigor at the beginning of my data collection and continued throughout the data analysis as I continually searched the transcripts of participant interviews and focus groups as well as the observation documents for emerging themes (Bastic, 2003). Applying rigor enabled me to arrive at "thick description," which was a rich and extensive set of details concerning methodology and context provided in a research study. Rich descriptions are hallmark of sound qualitative research and the basis for qualitative data analysis (Denzin, 1989).

As another critical application of qualitative rigor, I pursued trustworthiness throughout my research study. Trustworthiness was demonstrated through credibility, which is comparable with internal validity, transferability, which is comparable with external validity, dependability, which is comparable with reliability, and conformability, which is comparable with objectivity or neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 2001). Credibility is "an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a 'credible' conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants' original data" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Transferability is the degree to which the findings of the research can apply or transfer beyond the bounds of the study. Dependability is an

assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. Confirmability is a measure of how well the inquiry's findings are supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In my research study, trustworthiness will be advanced through the strategies outlined below.

The credibility of qualitative research findings relies heavily on the confidence readers have in the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field (Patton, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990) believed that theoretical sensitivity comes from a number of sources, including professional literature, professional experiences, and personal experiences. Thus, my theoretical sensitivity, my credibility is enhanced by my extensive review of the literature and data pertaining to my study as well as my personal and professional experiences with collaborating and working with school and community families of all cultures and ethical backgrounds.

Another method of qualitative rigor is triangulation – the use of multiple and different sources, methods, and theories to corroborate evidence by cross checking data through different sources (Creswell, 1998; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). In this research study I used two methods of triangulation as described by Denzin (1984) and Patton (2002) to establish a high level of corroboration of my data. They are referred to as methods (or methodological) triangulation which is when one approach is followed by another to increase confidence in the interpretation; and data to remain the same in different context. For example, in my study I asked semi-structured open-ended questions in each individual interview and focus group (with variant context-appropriate probing questions) and I used three categories of data sources (individual interviews, focus groups, and observations) to

gather data for the study. By using these triangulation processes for my data collection, I was able to draw conclusions from the data by comparing and analyzing data from one source against other data sources (Denzin, 1978).

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is the researcher's responsibility to protect study participants, especially those with special vulnerabilities (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001, p. 171). Protection extends to both those participants directly involved in the study as well as third parties indirectly linked to the study. An example of vulnerable participants in this investigation is parents whose immigration status is not secure. The official consent documents were translated into Spanish so that all participants were able to read in their native language about what participation entailed. I followed all procedures required of the University of New Mexico for researchers whose investigations involve human subjects, and the study was approved by the University of New Mexico Internal Review Board (IRB).

I changed the names (using pseudonyms) of all participants and the institution they were connected with and obscured references to organizations, locations, and events that might have provided identifying information that could be linked to the participants. These measures also provided protection to third parties who were mentioned in the course of the interviews (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001, p. 171-172). Other examples of third parties include participants' children and the school personnel where the participants' children attend. Ensuring the confidentiality of participants and third parties in my study involved slightly altering and deleting of some data (e. g., participants' names, gender, name of school that participants' children attend). However, this should not affect the scholarly value of the dissertation (p. 172).

### **Informed Consent**

All research participants were informed about the investigation and the main features of its design (Kvale, 1996). Participants in the study were volunteers and had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. They were informed that their names were kept confidential and a pseudonym was used when reporting the data. They were also informed that they have the opportunity to review the transcript of their responses immediately following the interview to make any needed corrections. As part of my research protocol, each participant received and signed the Consent to Participate in Research Form (see Appendix D) outlining all the above points and delineating any risks associated with participating with the research prior to taking part in interviews, observations or focus groups.

### **Timeline for Study**

This study took approximately one year to complete. It began in the spring 2011 semester with the development of my research question and sub-questions, review of literature, preliminary design of the study, and initial contact with the Associate Superintendent of the district for the study. The data collection took approximately one full semester and the study concluded in the spring 2013 semester with the written analysis of my research findings.

### **Summary**

This research study was designed from a constructivist perspective using a qualitative mode of inquiry that enabled me to gain a deep understanding of Mexican immigrant parents and their experiences and engagements in the education of their child.

I explored and understand this culture and relationship between home and school through the method of focus groups. The population which I sampled consisted of Mexican immigrant parents from an urban public middle school. I used purposeful criterion sampling, including snowball sampling to select participants for individual interviews and focus groups. Each participant was part of the school and community with a child enrolled at the middle school site of study. I used Joyce Epstein's Parent Involvement Comprehensive Framework as a lens to assist me in finding connections to the relationships between families and schools and the meaning parents made of their engagement. I conducted participant observations using an observation guide with specific categories that assisted me to note parent behaviors during school event, function or activities.

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Introduction

One of my top most interests in studying Lobo Middle School was to get some sense of how it was that family engagement was or was not having an effect on the school reform initiatives and raising student achievement. Based on extensive interviews with parents and some teachers, including the school community liaison, I was able to gather the perspectives of constituents of the school community regarding the multiple effects that family engagement had on the school. In these interviews, parents talked about effects which fell into three main categories: the quality of teaching, the quality of learning, and the quality of the social and relational well-being of the school community.

My overall finding here was that, while much has clearly been accomplished both in terms of quality of instruction and the engagement of parents, it remained necessary to examine the ways in which these two components of the work were actually interacting in order to produce “highly engaged parents and students”. Clearly, a big part of what is unique about Lobo Middle School is the emphasis that the school and community leadership places on parent engagement as a lever for student growth. Summarizing the school’s strategy for achieving its mission, Senor Castañon (School Family Liaison) said quite clearly that “quality instruction plus engaged parent engagement equals successful students” and neither of those have more weight than the other. To some—particularly those who are attracted to the idea of using parent involvement as a key lever for promoting educational quality—this formulation may seem quite compelling; for others, the role of parents in this process may seem a bit overstated.

The purpose of this chapter then is to attempt to understand how family engagement is actually contributing to raising student achievement. While this would be impossible in any quantifiable sense, it is possible to draw some important conclusions based on evidence gathered from some of the individuals who are intimately involved in the educational lives of the students: parents and school personnel. Thus, in the following pages, I first talk about parents' perceptions of the ways that Mexican parent involvement contributed and did not contribute to the academic life of the school and its students. Additionally, I examined some of the limitations of Mexican immigrant parent involvement at Lobo Middle School and speculated a bit about how it could be enhanced in order to better approximate the mission the school has set out for itself.

In addition to the fact that there is high quality teaching and learning at Lobo Middle School, part of the premise of this study is that there are high levels of Mexican parent involvement at the school. Early indicators for this latter fact were what led me to choose this school for my study and it was confirmed during my data collection. Again, it is worth mentioning here that the two pillars of the school's mission to educate all students to high standards are high quality instruction and high quality family engagement. In respect to the latter, the school has clearly succeeded in engaging parents in a number of ways. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the involvement of Mexican immigrant families at Lobo Middle School. In doing so, I used the focus group data that were gathered from the three parent focus groups composed of 7 parents in each group—all of which was held at the school. In conjunction with this data, however, I also relied upon the interviews and observations that I conducted during my time at the school. Using this data, I provided both an overview of the different types of family engagement that existed



at the school and home as well as more detailed descriptions of two types of involvement that are particularly prevalent and which have particular relevance to this study.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I provide some analysis regarding some of the different patterns of involvement and demonstrate that, while certain parents are involved in deep and important ways at Lobo Middle School, it is also true that certain populations of Mexican immigrant parents are more involved than others.

### Types of Family Engagement at Lobo Middle School

In response to the wide variety of ways in which parents are engaged in their children's education, a number of researchers have formulated various frameworks for categorizing different types of involvement. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Joyce Epstein's six categories of parent involvement: home-based childrearing, parent-school communication, volunteering at school, supporting learning at home, collaborations with community groups, and participation on decision-making bodies (Epstein, 1993). Other formulations include Henderson & Berla's 1994 four categories of involvement: supporting student learning at home, supporting the school, participating on decision-making bodies, and student advocacy. In order to help me formulate my own analysis of parent involvement at Lobo Middle School, however, I borrowed and adapted categories from other researchers in order to formulate a simple set of categories of my own. My three categories are:

- 1) Involvement related to **teaching and learning** (although this could logically include parent involvement at home, I had much greater access to school-based involvement during the course of this study and will focus more on that here);

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<sup>1</sup> It is important here to note that, in selecting Mexican immigrant parents to be part of this study, I intentionally sought out those who seemed particularly involved at the school. The idea here was to hear from those who were most intimately connected to the school and would be able to talk most concretely about how Mexican immigrant parents made meaning of their involvement and if their engagement was or was not having an influence. Overall, I interviewed over a dozen parents. In a number of cases, I interviewed parents more than once over the course of a semester.

- 2) Involvement related to **non-academic support** (this includes a variety of services to staff, students, or the school community at large which are not directly related to core academic work); and
- 3) Participation in **decision-making and advocacy** (either within the school or through wider political activism).

In the following pages, I briefly describe some of the more prevalent types of involvement at Lobo MS in the context of these larger categories; after that, I will describe two particularly important types of involvement in greater depth: student led conferences and family curriculum nights.

### **Involvement in Teaching and Learning**

Because my research was based mostly at the school site, I have limited data regarding the ways that Mexican immigrant parents are involved with their children's education at home. What I do have is based upon four observations I conducted from the Mexican immigrant parents or guardians of students attending Lobo Middle School during the 2012-2013 school year. One observation was at the school site during a student-led conference, another observation during a Family Math Curriculum Night for the general public, and the other two during home visits after-school to an engaged parent's home and to a non-engaged parent, both Mexican immigrants to this country. The other relevant pieces of data I collected are from three focus groups and more than a dozen individual interviews of Mexican immigrant parents. Results from the four observations most directly related to involvement in student learning at home and the Quality of Education survey indicated that Mexican immigrant parents were extremely active. First, virtually all parents (100%) reported that they spoke to their children about

what they were studying in school (75% reporting doing so at least once a week); second, the vast majority of Mexican immigrant parents (83%) reported that they helped their children with their homework (60% reporting doing so at least once a week); and 84% reported that they talked with their children's teachers about their students' progress in school, not including during student-led conferences (27% reporting doing so at least once a week).

What is perhaps equally important as the amount of engagement, however, is the *quality* of this engagement. Having had the opportunity to observe parent-child interactions in homes and having only garnered bits of descriptions of these interactions from parents and students, it is difficult to make any clear assessments about the quality of these interactions. Nonetheless, I did pay particular attention to school-based activities which had the potential to build parents' capacity to either support or hold students accountable for their learning. In this sense, the types of practices that I list under this category of involvement—though they can relate to home-based activities—really have to do with parental involvement related to student learning which occurs at the school. Specifically, three main activities—student-led conferences, family curriculum nights, and PLC (Professional Learning Community) parent grade-level meetings—provided opportunities for Mexican immigrant parents to become more familiar with the academic work students were being asked to do as well as learn specific strategies for helping their students at home.

#### Student Led Conferences

At Lobo Middle School, perhaps the single most powerful medium for helping Mexican parents to build their capacity to understand the work students were being asked

to do and, in turn, help their children do this work at home, were the student-led conferences. These conferences were conducted in Spanish for the Spanish speaking parents, two times a year and typically lasted between a half hour and an hour each. Although there are currently no consequences for not attending these conferences, all parents at the school signed a contract indicating they will attend all conferences and, according to the assistant principal, teachers have reported approximately 95% attendance. As I describe later on, some of the most salient characteristics of these conferences include prominent roles students played in them, thoroughness with which student strengths and weaknesses were described to parents by both teachers and students, and teachers' communication of specific strategies parents could use at home to promote their children's learning. Due to both the quality and prevalence of this type of involvement, I will describe these conferences in detail later on in this chapter.

#### Family Curriculum Nights

Three family curriculum nights are held every year at Lobo Middle School. The Family events are held during evenings on a week day and are open to the school community. The primary purpose of these events is to give family members, community members, and teachers and students themselves opportunities to observe products of student learning at the end of each semester. As is the case with student-led conferences, most parents signed a contract indicating they will attend family curriculum nights each year; and while the school has not kept careful records of the number of parents that attend these events, 90% of the Mexican immigrant parents who participated in the focus groups indicated that they go to them (75% reporting attendance at all three family curriculum nights each year).

At Lobo Middle School, family curriculum nights are major, large-scale events that involve lengthy planning and preparation by both students and teachers. All students in the school have some type of work on display or are involved in some type of exhibit or performance; in addition to families and staff members, curriculum nights are typically attended by school district leaders, educators from other schools, and local politicians. During my attendance at two of these events, I paid particular attention to ways that parents were and were not engaged in student work that was on display and planned activities for families. In a number of instances, it seemed evident that these events provided significant opportunities for parents to develop an appreciation for work students are involved in on a day-to-day basis, though it was not always clear to what degree parents actually absorbed or made use of this information. Again, because of the prevalence of these events and potential connections to parental engagement in the learning of their students, I will describe the family curriculum nights in more detail later on in this chapter.

Grade-level PLC (professional learning community) meetings

Teachers at all grade levels periodically held meetings with parents in order to convey information about their classes and engage all families in discussions about a variety of topics. Although parents committed to attending at least two of these meetings each year in the school's family contract, the school does not keep careful records of parent attendance at them. The frequency of these meetings varied; while some teachers had or at least attempted to have these meetings about twice a month, others have them less frequently.

In some cases, teachers reported using these meetings to discuss specific problems occurring in their classes (such as concerns regarding discipline) or to plan events (such as field trips or fundraising efforts). In many cases, however, these meetings were used to help all parents, especially those who did not speak English understand the type of work students were doing in class and provide parents with strategies for helping students at home in Spanish. A couple of teachers (Math and Language Arts) explained that they tried to go beyond covering grade-level standards or descriptions of curricula and engaged Spanish speaking parents in simulated classroom activities so these parents could experience the type of instruction that occurred in class. In one class, these activities were meant to help Spanish speaking parents understand the purpose of doing work in groups (rather than having the teacher lecture to students or asking students to do all their work individually), or to help them understand the concepts embedded in the math curriculum used. One 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher explained to a Spanish speaking parent that, in order to ensure that parents did not feel intimidated by these sessions, she made sure that little or no reading was required of parents during these activities. The Mexican national parent also described at least one case in which she realized that she had to catch up on her knowledge of fractions and other mathematical concepts began attending classes with her daughter so she would be able to more effectively at home in order to be helpful.

### **Non-Academic Support**

At Lobo Middle School, there is a wide variety of parents that could, be considered supportive of the school. Many of these types of support are consistent with what is widely thought of as "traditional" family engagement. For example, at Lobo

Middle School, parents are engaged in school recognitions and fiestas, chaperoning students on project based learning field trips, attending sport games, and participating in fundraising efforts. Of the Mexican immigrant parents who participated in a focus group, 50% reported that they attend field trips, student athletic events, or other student events apart from the Family Curriculum Nights. While it is impossible to determine either from my focus groups or from interviews and observations at home or school all ways Mexican immigrant parents support the school, there are a few types of involvement which a number of staff members identified during a Professional Learning Community meeting as having an important impact.

According to Senora Martinez, and a number of other Mexican parents, one of the main types of involvement Spanish speaking parents provided was in the form of fundraising for the school. One particularly dramatic example of this was the parents' efforts to save Lobo's after-school program. Due to a district-wide budget crisis, the school was suddenly faced with the possibility of having to abandon the extended learning program which included both tutoring support as well as a number of extra-curricular activities. In response to this, Mexican parents on the school's leadership team initiated an aggressive fundraising campaign which ultimately rested most heavily upon the parents themselves who agreed to raise and donate money to the school. Another large-scale fundraising event occurred around the 6<sup>th</sup> graders' field trip to New York/DC. One Mexican parent leader recalled parents' efforts to raise money by making and selling tamales at the school; in addition to the economic benefits of these efforts, the Mexican parent leader emphasized the ways in which they contributed to a growing sense of community within the school.

To me, what was just so amazing was the whole òbiscochitosö fundraiser that the 6<sup>th</sup> graders had. I don't know how much you know about this, but that was just mind blowingô that they were able to raise so much money through parents encouraging other parents to sell cookies. And it was not just the Mexican parents that were here doing it; it was everybody.

Everybody was learning how to sell cookies, everybody was participating to raise money for their kids to go to the New York/DC trip! And now, we've had more than two school-wide fundraisers, and it's just been getting bigger and bigger, and it's just amazing to see parents working as a school family.

Typically, Lobo Middle School, fundraising occurred within the context of a variety of festivals, celebrations, and community events. In virtually all of these cases, the making and selling of food played a prominent part. This same parent leader talked in general about food being a unifying force at the school and how, in many instancesô such as during the school's Family Curriculum Nights or at the Community eventsô food was a key way other parents were able to contribute.

Food is just such a big thing for families, you know, it brings you together, there is this level of òthis is my food, this is my cultureö kind of thing. For them to be so willing to just give on situations like that is just amazing, you know, and we might not understand how the curriculum fits into all of this, but this is what we do understand and this is how we can contribute and this is how we want to be there.



An additional way Mexican immigrant parents provided support for the school is through their supervision of students. In some cases, supervision was very informal: parents looked after students on the playground, chaperoned field trips, or, through their mere presence in the hallways, helped keep an eye on student behavior. Parents also took on more formalized roles. In some cases, parents volunteered on a permanent basis, while others assisted in the classroom under the teachers' supervision once a week. In one interview, a Mexican father talked about how he began coaching the boys' soccer team at the school. Although this was not something that anyone on the staff had asked him to do, he took the initiative in finding a way to be useful and supportive to the school and to students.

I know that kids get very restless and, since I was a church leader years ago, I've been motivated to work with young people. And since my kids are now at the age where they need help—someone to motivate them, train them in sports—so that they are not on the streets dealing with things that could jeopardize their future, I talked with Coach Vigil about doing the soccer thing at the end of last year. Then I talked to a teacher here at the school and we started taking the kids out to play soccer. Now there is a boys' and girls' team. We have about 60 kids who are part of the soccer team<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Miro que hay mucha inquietud entre los niños y, como yo fui líder de una iglesia cristiana ya hace años, me motivo mucho trabajar con los jóvenes. Y como mis hijos ya están en la edad que necesitan la ayuda de alguien para motivarlos, para entretenerlos en el deporte, para que no estén en el barrio lidiando con otras cosas que los puede perjudicar el futuro, hable con la Coach Vigil de esto del fútbol hace un año cuando estaba terminando el año. Y hay un maestro que trabaja aquí en la escuela, y nos pusimos de acuerdo y estamos llevando a los niños a jugar fútbol. Hay un equipo de niños y niñas. Tenemos unos 60 niños que son parte del equipo de fútbol.

Although this father's work was voluntary, it is an example of how some parent involvement at Lobo Middle School began to improve and demonstrate that academics are a priority for Mexican families. For example, as mentioned, several parents volunteer in the classroom or assist in the after-school program, while others are active in school-wide events. A 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, talked about how having Spanish speaking parents in these types of roles is particularly helpful—both in terms of the quality of services they provide as well as in terms of their ability to effectively promote the involvement of other parents. Even though there is a regular paid staff member that coordinates the after-school program, according to this 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, parents were reliable enough to run the program almost on their own.

One of the hardest things about running an after-school program is the staffing. A lot of times your best people are teachers. So, you burn out your teachers by working them until three ten and then you ask them to work until five, and burn out, especially the young ones who are going to do it. Then you say you're supposed to collaborate, plan, and do all these things. Well, our parents could run the after-school program, and when you have parents run an after-school program instead of college or high school students or random people, you can leave. We can all leave the building, and you know that it will be clean, the kids will be safe, and no kid will be left here . . . Sometimes, you'll see them here until six-thirty because people don't get picked up. You know, they just really take ownership in a way that other people wouldn't.

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Similarly, a Mexican parent volunteer talked about how having parents working in the office was a good idea because it contributed to the school's ability to engage and follow-up with other parents in a variety of ways.

I think that the parents have really made life easier for Mari (front office clerk) and the teachers of the school when we as parents help in calling other parents who speak the same language. "The school wants to inform you that your child wasn't in school, you didn't come to the student-led conference, let the school know if you need this or that." We as parents are sort of the front line and together do a phenomenal job. I think we make the work of teachers much easier because a lot of the times the teachers come to one of us and say, "Can you help me with this parent, I'm having a really hard time," and we will help you with the parent that you're struggling with.

### **Decision-making and Advocacy**

The main decision-making body at Lobo Middle School is the school's Instructional Leadership Team. The Instructional Leadership Team, officially composed of most staff members (including the principal) and one or two parent representatives from each grade level (called "parent leaders"), essentially operate as a type of site council that reviews policies, budgets, and issues of school-wide concern. Each year, parent leaders are voted onto the team by parents from their child's grade level. In general, parents elected to these positions have demonstrated themselves quite active in the school in one way or another and represent many of the Mexican parents I interviewed.

According to the Mexican parent leaders I interviewed, one clear development that occurred over time was that the parents began to take on an increasingly dominant and independent role on the Team—partly, because in the school's second year of transformation, each individual grade level voted two members onto the team in order to share leadership within classrooms. Thus, during the school's second year, there were approximately six parents on the Instructional Leadership Team. Although I was a participant in team meetings, several people indicated to me that, while parent attendance at these meetings increased, teacher attendance dropped, so that, by the end of the second year, one teacher actually questioned whether it was really a school leadership team or whether it was simply a parent council. While it became clear to me that teacher attendance at these meetings decreased over time (whether, it was a conscious decision on the part of parents or teachers to give parents more ownership, or that teachers were simply less motivated or too busy to attend these meetings), it was clear that parents began to assume more ownership of the Team than in the past. For example, as mentioned previously, during the school's second year, parent leaders launched an aggressive fundraising campaign to save Lobo's after-school program from budget cuts. Perhaps the main development, however, was the increasingly political nature of the group's work.

While a number of parents at Lobo Middle School maintained some involvement in community affairs and politics surrounding the restructuring and transformation of the school, a number of Mexican immigrant parents I interviewed indicated that family engagement at Lobo Middle School became more intensely political in year two. This was clearly precipitated by a number of pressing problems identified by the school

district's sudden realization that based on low performance and poor academic trends of data in reading and math it was facing a school take over by the Public Education Department. This shocking announcement was made in the fall semester and brought on a number of short-term crises that Lobo Middle School was forced to confront during the rest of the school year. First, based on the new information, there was talk that Lobo Middle School like other schools would lose their teachers and be forced to re-constitute. Second, the district's situation also jeopardized the school's plan to allocate monies to sustain current academic programs, including maintaining a low pupil-teacher ratio. Other financial fallout included the potential loss of Lobo's after-school program (which was eventually narrowly salvaged through parental fundraising efforts).

During the course of the school year, Mexican immigrant families and numerous community groups across the city launched a number of efforts to advocate for their particular school. At the forefront of these efforts were parents from Lobo Middle School particularly parents from the Instructional Leadership Team. Since the district's early announcements about its restructuring plans and particularly since the state's indications that it would take over the school mostly Mexican immigrant parents were rallied by other community organized groups, school staff, and parent leaders, to exercise their collective political clout in order to help protect the school's interests. A number of planning and informational meetings for parents were held at Lobo Middle School, and additional small and large-scale meetings were held with local and state politicians in the state capital.

Senora Rosa María Ramírez, a Mexican immigrant parent who was a school and community organizer and a Lobo Middle School parent, was in the thick of all parental

mobilization that occurred. According to her, once the financial crisis was announced, Lobo parents began meeting as a group almost once a month for one issue or another. For example, in January of that year, she estimated that 75% of Lobo families attended a 200-person meeting with the associate superintendent, the school board, the county commissioner, a state senator in order to express their concern about the possibility of having a state administrator take over the school. In March, she indicated that Lobo parents constituted a large portion of the 200 parents who met with the associate superintendent and school board to protest school take-over. And, in May, parents met with families from other schools to talk about the state takeover and their concern about losing site-based autonomy. Interspersed among these large public meetings were Lobo-based informational and planning meetings where parents learned about, discussed, and decided on responses to the different issues that came up.

Despite widespread community opposition to the take-over, at the end of the school year, the state granted the school five options, one of which included development of a comprehensive design plan. The day after a new administrator was installed; one of the parent leaders expressed her concerns, in essence, capturing much of the fervor and emotion that surrounded the parents' organizing efforts during the course of the year.

I was very worried. I cried many nights because I felt so impotent, wondering what we were going to do when this man [the administrator] arrives. And who knows if he supports Mexican immigrants and other parents? it just seems impossible to think that this person wants to help and to continue with this school reform. Because, to me, it's obvious that they (district) had decided to send him here and they did it all kind of

behind closed doors and made us waste so much time, so many meetings, so many things all for nothing. But I am glad to know it was you who speaks our language and looks like us.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to more visible political efforts Mexican parents engaged in during the course of the year, smaller groups of parent leaders met with local politicians to advocate on the school's behalf. For example, a small group of Mexican parent leaders held meetings with their school board member in order to try to secure economic relief for the school. Parents also made trips to the state capital to express their concerns to state officials. According to both parents and staff, over the course of the year, Mexican immigrant parent leaders not only became more politically active, but increasingly independent and self-sufficient.

Two other Mexican immigrant parents I interviewed who had been parent leaders the first year, but not the second expressed concerns about poor communication with the school teachers. They felt that not all of the new parent leaders were doing a good job of communicating with other parents and teachers about initiatives parents were working on.

A lot of communication was lost this year. Parents still come and ask me, "Hey, is there going to be a [parent] meeting?" And sometimes I would call the school to find out if there was . . . [One time] I was asking a teacher at the school, "Hey, do you know if this or that is going to

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<sup>3</sup> Yo estube bien preocupada. Yo lloré por muchas noches porque me sentía muy impotente, pensando que vamos a hacer cuando llega este hombre (director). Y quién sabe si apoya al Mexicano inmigrante y otros padres de familia. Es que a mi se me hace imposible de creer que esta persona quiere ayudar o quiere seguir con esta reforma de las escuelas. Porque para mi es obvio que ya habian destinado a el para este lugar y lo hicieron todo como a escondidas y nos hicieron perder tanto tiempo, tantas juntas, tantas cosas para nada. Pero estube contenta en saber que era alguien como usted que habla nuestro idioma y que se parece a nosotros.

happen?ö And she told me she didn't know, but that we could go find outí and we went walking around the school to see if any of the people who were still around late in the day knew anything. And it wasn't until the next day that she was able to tell me anything, and do you know what she told me? That, õyes, I talked to so-and-so who is in charge of this, but we [the teachers] didn't know.ö So, we realized that even a teacher loses communication with the parent leaders<sup>4</sup>.

Even Senor Castañon, the school family liaison expressed a concern that the emphasis on political organizing came at a cost in that it slowed down progress made in terms of strengthening relationships between parents and teachers at the school.

We're losing the relationship between parents and teachers that we've had up until now. That's an area in which, so far, the work has not been done; it has not been possible to do it becauseô for one reason or anotherô a lot of energy is being spent on the political situation for the survival of the school. So, in some ways, we've lost something. We haven't had the energy to devote to this part which is so essential and so necessary which could develop later on because survival is the most important thing right now<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Habia bastante comunicacion que se perdio este año. Todavia hasta ahorita los padres llegan y me dicen, õOye, pero va a haber una junta?ö Y en ese rato muchas veces hablaba a la oficina para ver si va a haber. . . [Una vez] yo me referia con una maestra y le decia, õOiga, no sabes si va a haber esto o algo?ö Y me decia que no pero que vamos a investigar . . . y ahi andabamos por toda la escuela para ver si alguien de los que quedaban en la escuela por la tarde sabian de alguna cosa. Y fue hasta el día siguiente que me tenia respuesta y sabe que me decia? Que õSi, ya hable con esta persona porque ella es la encargada, nosotros no sabiamos.ö Entonces nos dimos cuenta que hasta un maestro se pierde la comunicacion con los lideres

<sup>5</sup> Estamos perdiendo hasta ahorita todavia la relacion de padres con maestros. Esa es una area que todavia no se ha podido, no se ha hecho el trabajo, no es que no se haya podidoô no se ha hecho el trabajo porque, por una razon u otra, se esta gastando much energia en lo que es la situacion politica de la escuela para sobrevivir como escuela. Entonces en cierto modo, hemos perdido. No hemos tenido la energia para poner



In addition to the perceived decline in communication, there was also evidence that time spent on political advocacy came at the expense of more academically-directed involvement. At the beginning of the year, for example, Senor Castañon talked to me about plans to provide some targeted training for Mexican parent leaders related to the school's instructional program; ultimately, the aim here was to get parent leaders to help provide similar training and support for other parents. By the end of the year, however, Senor Castañon and others indicated that these types of efforts had not really gotten off the ground. Summarizing the direction parent involvement at the school took, one teacher said the following:

This year, parent involvement really hasn't been around learning. It's kind of been in crisis mode. So, we're talking about parent involvement for a political organization. Parent involvement for fundraising. Parent involvement for the staffing problems. Parent involvement for discipline problems. But parent involvement for teaching, curriculum, report cards—that's been much less this year. So, and it's just, it's just because of the circumstances, really. It's not, such a bad thing. You know, parent involvement, overall, is way up. It's just, there's certain things that require parents to get involved or the school will not survive.

#### Two Key Types of Involvement

As described above, Mexican immigrant parents are involved at Lobo Middle School in a variety of different ways. However, it is worth paying particular attention to a couple of types of involvement that have special importance—both in terms of their

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en esta parte que tan esencial y tan necesaria pero que puede surgir despues porque sobrevivir es lo mas importante ahorita.

implications for student learning as well as in terms of their prevalence at the school.

Based on my observations of the *student-led conferences* and *family curriculum nights*, I found that both of these activities provided opportunities for Mexican immigrant parents to generate deeper understandings of the type of work students are doing and expected to do at school, and in many cases, provided opportunities for all parents to learn new ways of more effectively supporting their students at home. These types of involvement are also important because they are considered to be “required” practices at Lobo Middle School.

In anticipation of the school’s second year of reform, a committee of parents and school staff created a “Family Contract” which both parents and students were expected to sign. This contract asked parents to abide by four main expectations:

- 1) Participate in student-led conferences two times a year
- 2) Attend the two out of three family curriculum nights
- 3) Attend Professional Learning Community grade-level meetings run by teachers or family leaders as needed
- 4) Respect the school’s uniform policy

When I asked Sr. Castañón about how he planned to hold parents accountable for meeting these expectations, he essentially said that he would rely on the school community to hold *itself* accountable.

I think that they [the expectations] will be a school-wide agreement. I think once you set expectations, people tend to hold themselves accountable to it; they look at each other, you know. I don’t have to do it.

I mean, I'm usually the bottom line. I usually say well, "Well, we were supposed to do things, but we didn't or you know, student-led conferences should not be only twenty minutes long." But before I say anything, the teachers themselves will usually start to bristle, you know. When you have teachers working this hard, seeing a teacher that isn't following what is an agreed upon community expectation that actually does more than I'll ever do. So, I think [it's about] creating a culture of high expectations where we're explicit about the agreements.

In other words, Senor Castañón's theory was that, in the same way staff members held each other accountable for their teaching, parents and the wider school community would hold each other accountable for their own responsibilities.

As of the end of the school's second year, the school had not established any set of consequences for not meeting any of the expectations; nonetheless, there was plenty of evidence that parental adherence to these "agreements" was extremely strong. I do not have data regarding parent attendance at Professional Learning Community grade-level meetings, however, according to Senor Casteñón, approximately 95% of parents attended student-led conferences; according to my focus group results, 95% of parents attended both family curriculum nights; and from talking to staff members, my impression is that overall attendance at other meetings was quite good as well (although there was wide variation in the nature of these meetings). Thus, using notes based on a number of direct observations, I will provide some detailed descriptions of two key types of parent involvement at Lobo Middle School.

### Student-Led Conferences

The student-led conferences were perhaps the most interesting parent-teacher interactions I observed at Lobo Middle School. At different points during the school year, I observed a number of conferences at different grade levels. While there were no uniform protocols that were used, the conferences shared some common characteristics. First, students were not only present for conferences, but, in all cases, actively participated in some way. Generally speaking, all grade levels from 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> students essentially ran the conferences themselves with little or no teacher support. Also, in many of the conferences I observed, teachers paid particular attention to explaining to parents ways they could help reinforce or build upon student learning at home. While this varied somewhat from grade to grade and conference to conference, it was clear that teachers put significant thought into how student learning would be communicated to parents. The conference was conducted in the parent's home language, either by the student and/or a translator employed by the school.

This latter point was evident not only in terms of how the conferences were conducted, but in terms of the progress reports themselves. Rather than merely providing a grade for each subject, progress reports were organized around some of the main standards students were expected to meet during each year or marking period. For example, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade math report card was broken up into the following categories: geometry, data/statistics, number sense and math operations, and algebra and math reasoning. Each of these categories had two or three descriptors that gave examples of the types of skills students were expected to master for each category. For example,

under *geometry*, there were three descriptors: 1) draw and measure angles and circles; 2) know types of triangles and angles and parts of a circle; 3) understand relationships between angles in shapes. Thus, students were not given a grade for *math* as a whole, but rather were given separate grades (designated as beginning, developing, mastery, or excellent) for each standard. Finally, there was a *comments* section in the document which allowed teachers to provide a paragraph or two of narrative about the student's progress. The comments were written in English and translated to the parent in Spanish.

In an effort to provide a sense of the types of parent-teacher interactions I observed around student learning, I will describe some of the student-led conferences I observed while at the school. Overall, I observed about a dozen of these conferences during two different points in time: once at the end of the school's first nine weeks and once again at the end of the second nine weeks. I made sure to observe conferences from each grade level that involved Mexican immigrant parents.

One of the first set of conferences I observed was conducted by a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student and his Mexican parent. The teacher began the conference by greeting the parent in Spanish. The teacher then asked the student to demonstrate specific skills right there on the spot for the parent in order to help illustrate the academic standard being discussed. For example, the teacher had this student read for his parent in both English and Spanish. He later, illustrated some of his work in Math. The student was asked to look at a Math problem containing ratios and proportional reasoning. In this case, he identified the two presidential candidates and explained the following example: "For every vote candidate A received, candidate C received nearly three votes." The teacher asked the student to explain and talk about ratios more in depth. The student then explained that a ratio was a

comparison between two things by division. For example, “suppose there are 3 democratic votes in a box of 5 votes total. The ratio of democratic votes to total votes can be written as 3 to 5, 3:5, or  $3/5$ .”

Second, during each of the conferences I observed, the teacher gave parents suggestions for things they could practice with their son or daughter at home to help build their skills. For example, in one conference with a seventh grader, the teacher pointed out that the student, while often knowing the answers to things in class, often had trouble expressing himself or articulating the answer. One of the things he suggested was that the parents, during the course of a regular day, ask him questions (as well as follow up questions) in order to get the student to practice explaining his thinking. “Even at the supermarket or something, you can ask him questions about things and have him practice explaining his answer. If he just gives you a one-word answer, use follow-up questions to get him to explain with more detail.” Right there, the teacher asked the student some questions and modeled for the parent what he meant by a “follow-up question.”

The conference that I documented in particular detail was conducted at the end of the second nine weeks with a 6th grade boy and his Mexican mother. Typical of other conferences I observed this teacher conduct, there was a lot of effort made to communicate not only aspects of the student’s learning to the parent, but to communicate the content of the materials being covered in class in Spanish, as well as strategies the mother could use at home to reinforce and extend this learning.

Sixth Grade Conference

The teacher began the conference by asking the student to go through his portfolio—a large binder with examples of his work from throughout the year—in order to show his mother some assignments he had done. The teacher did not pick the assignments, but asked the student to choose a couple he thought were either “particularly good” or which he “had problems with.” In order to prompt the student to start talking about the assignment chosen, the teacher asked, “Now, what concept were you working on here?” After the student talked a bit about two different assignments from his portfolio, the teacher began to go over the student’s progress in each of the various subject areas.

Before going back to samples of student work from the portfolio, however, the teacher pulled out the student’s latest standardized test results. Using the individual student’s testing report, the teacher highlighted specific areas that the student did well on and other areas where improvement was needed. At different points, he also made reference to some of the standards from the progress report and explained how they related to portions of the exam. After checking to see if the mother had any questions, the teacher then moved on to speak more generally about the student’s strengths and weaknesses as demonstrated in class. In writing, for example, he pointed out that the student had a very good imagination. To illustrate this, the teacher pulled out a writing sample from the student’s portfolio and asked the student what the piece was about and how it was that he came up with ideas for it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This tendency to have students explain the concept(s) they were “trying to get at” or the thinking that went into a certain piece of work seemed to be common throughout the school. On another day, for example, I was walking through the hallway as one of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers emerged from his classroom

After discussing the student's writing, the teacher moved on to reading. Here, the teacher told the mother the student had fairly good comprehension skills and, to illustrate this, asked the student some questions about ethical treatment of animals involved in scientific research which was studied in class recently. After the student explained the demands of science ethics involving research on living subjects, the teacher pointed out that, in general, the student was particularly stimulated by scientific themes and that he should be encouraged to read non-fiction books at home about science and the world. Referring back to the student's comprehension skills, the teacher then told the parent, "I'm going to show you examples of how to help him with this even more."

Pointing at a poster in the class that listed reading comprehension strategies, the teacher told the parent that there was "a new strategy" that the class was working on called "visualization." To illustrate how this worked, the teacher took out a book in order to read a passage from it out loud. Before beginning, however, he asked the student to begin forming an image in his head while the passage was being read to him. At the end of the passage, the teacher asked the student to describe specific details of the image that he formulated in his mind. With each detail, the teacher prompted the student to provide fuller descriptions of the image and then pointed out to the mother that, not only did the student have a clear image of what was being read to him, but that it was a *creative* image and that he now had the seeds of a full story that he could write on his own. Later in the conference, the teacher explained that the class was also working on the idea of "meta-cognition," that is, the ability of students to think about their thinking. At one point,

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with a student and her mother; pointing to a piece of student writing that was displayed in the hallway, the teacher asked the student to explain to her mother what the paper was about and "what you were trying to do with this assignment."



speaking directly to the student, the teacher said, "Day by day, we're creating a portfolio," referring to the large student binder in front of him, "but also you have to create a portfolio in your head."

After covering all academic parts of the class and the student's progress report with the parent, the teacher then moved on to the student's progress in relation to school expectations and principles. Just as the progress reports at Lobo Middle School have each subject area broken down into different standards, progress reports at all grade levels also have a special section devoted to the school's expectations and principles. Here, each principle is listed as a "standard" which is accompanied by several indicators listed as "evidence of standard." For example, under principle #1, "take charge of your own learning," is written: "1) Turn in all required assignments completed and on time; 2) Ask for help when you need it; 3) Seek out own knowledge beyond what is assigned." Going over this part of the progress report with the student's mother during the conference, the teacher pointed out that the student needed to "be more reflective about his work, make connections, and take more ownership of his learning." Again, by using examples from the student's work in class and by making reference to the different indicators for each standard, the teacher explained how he had drawn these conclusions.

One other important aspect of this conference— in addition to the use of student work, student voice, and the recommendation of strategies the parent could use at home— was the way the teacher asked the mother to talk about the progress *she* had seen in terms of her son's skills and to identify problems or concerns she had about his learning. At this point, the boy's mother indicated that her son sometimes got confused with certain numbers— particularly bigger numbers— and gave a couple of examples of

how this had occurred at home. The teacher explained that it was an issue of understanding place value and proceeded to show the mother where the related standard appeared on the report card.

In most of the student-led conferences, students took on much more prominent roles in conducting the student-led conferences. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher I observed, for example, had students run the conferences almost entirely without assistance. This teacher had several sets of Mexican Spanish speaking parents come in for a conference at the same time and, while each student conferred with their parents, the teacher served only as a facilitator, rotating from conference to conference, at times asking the student prompting questions or responding to specific questions by parents. At one of these sessions, I observed the process from start to finish and attempted to document as much of the individual conferences as possible. Because of the unique format of these conferences, they are worth describing in some detail.

#### Eighth Grade Conference

This conference was all conducted in Spanish. At the appointed time, three sets of Spanish speaking parents arrived at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher's classroom with their students. Gathering the full group into a circle, the teacher explained to parents in Spanish the process that would be used in the conference and reminded the students of things they should cover. In doing so, she pointed to an easel with chart paper where the following was written:

Please Share (Por Favor Comparte):

- 1) How you've grown as a mathematician (Como has aumentado con tus matemáticas)
- 2) How you've grown as a writer (Como has mejorado en tu escritura)
- 3) How you've grown in terms of the Expectations and Character Counts principles (Como has crecido con las expectativas y principales de tu Caracter que Cuenta)

Focus on Strengths and Weaknesses and use your portfolio work as evidence. (Enfoca en tus habilidades y debilidades y usa tu trabajo en tu portafolio como evidencia)

The teacher then took a few minutes to review some basic information about what the students worked on that year and asked parents if they had any general questions. After going over a couple of "housekeeping" items, the teacher asked if the parents had any plans for how they would help their children retain what they learned or build their skills over the winter break. One mother responded that she was planning to have her daughter read for thirty minutes a day. The other parents kind of nodded in agreement that it would be a good idea. Another mother then said that it would be helpful to have some specific guidance about what to have her child read.

In response, the teacher recommended that they have students identify some key areas of interest and read a variety of books (of different genres and types) about those topics so they could practice making connections between different texts. She then stressed that, more important than the specific topic students chose was that they focus on something they were interested in and to go into depth. She also recommended that parents create some kind of contract with their child in which they outline what they

would do over the winter break. Speaking to one father, in particular, she suggested that his son—who would be spending much of the winter break with relatives in Mexico—write a diary of his trip. The father nodded and another parent chimed in, “That can help with their writing.” At that point, the parents became more animated and started coming up with more suggestions for what their students could do over the winter break. For the next few minutes, the meeting took on the tone of a small study group, as the parents rapidly began exchanging ideas with the teacher and one another. When the teacher suggested that going to museums was one way to mix learning with vacation time, for example, the father mentioned that they could see mummies at a museum in the Mexican city of Guanajuato where they would be spending part of the winter break. Another mother chimed in, “Oh yes, there’s a lot to see there!”

Overall, the teacher convened the whole group for no more than ten or fifteen minutes and then had each student take their parents to a different part of the room to begin the individual conferences which took between thirty and forty minutes. While students went over their work with their parents, the teacher rotated to each station, doing some minor coaching of the students and answering parent questions that students were unable to answer about their work. In the meantime, I listened in on some of the conferences.

In one conference, a boy told his parents about his writing and made the point that he was strong in coming up with “counter-arguments” in his persuasive essays. Referring to an essay in his portfolio about Mexican farm workers in California entitled, “Should kids do farm work?” the boy gave an example of a counter-argument: “An argument

could be -kids could get health care from doing work,øand a counter-argument could be that -farm workers donø *get* health care.øö

In another conference, a girl was telling her mother that she tended to rush her math work and that she needed to be neater. She also went over a couple of problems from a math test and explained the thinking she used in trying to solve the problems. Moving on to writing, the girl explained that this was one of her strengths because she was learning to use more õpowerfulö words, but that she still needed to work on including more details and had to work on using more variation in her wording (by way of example she said that instead of saying õthingö over and over again, she could say õobjectö). In terms of the Character Counts principles, she said that she did not give up on things as easily as before, that she was less shy and more courteous than she had been in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and that she thought more about her future and the consequences of her actions.

Another girl showed her mother the written feedback she had gotten from her classmates on her writing and used this to illustrate what she needed to work on. In terms of the Character Counts principles, she told her mother that she now worked harder and thought more about how her actions affected others. Mid-way through the conference, the teacher, hovering nearby, prompted the student to talk about how she thought she had grown over the last *two* years and to talk from memory, rather than use a set of written reflections she prepared for the conference. As she did this, the student compared her experience at Lobo Middle School with that of her former school in the heights, saying that her old school should have had students think about how they were getting along better or where they needed to improve in their work. Also, she said that her old school

didn't give stuff to take home to practice, and that, during her time at Lobo Middle School, she learned to persevere more.

Curious about the parents' reactions to the conferences, I debriefed a bit with the mother of one of the girls and the mother and father of the boy. I was particularly interested to see what the parents thought of the format of the conference since this was the first time the teacher had tried using it. The year before, the conferences in this class when these same students had been 7<sup>th</sup> graders were more traditional; that is, while the students participated in the conferences in a fashion similar to that of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students described previously, they were not responsible for running the conferences themselves.

In my post-conference talks with parents, responses to the new conference format were fairly positive, but somewhat mixed. For example, the boy's father commented that he liked the format of the conference because it gave the student practice explaining things so that they won't feel nervous talking about their learning with their parents or others. The mother concurred, but mentioned that it would be better if parents were given some guidance in terms of what types of questions to ask during the conference. The mother of one of the girls said that the format seemed OK, but that she felt her daughter had been less focused than in the previous conference and had done a better job of describing her learning when the teacher was there.

### Family Curriculum Nights

Three times a year, Lobo Middle School puts on family curriculum nights to showcase student work, trends of data and strategies for parents to use at home. The

Family Nights, as staff and students call them, are held on a week day during the evening and open to the public. I attended two of them, one in mid September, and another in December. Each was well attended by parents, community members, and a number of educators from other schools and educational organizations. At one of the family nights, I spotted the school district superintendent and, apparently, other family nights were attended by local politicians as well. While the focus of these events is on student work, it feels more like a festival or celebration, since parents make and sell Mexican foods and artistic crafts, and students put on a number of musical and theatrical performances throughout the evening.

During the second family night I attended, the following presentations were made by various groups of students: the 6<sup>th</sup> graders put on an "American Indian cabaret," using music, dance, poetry, and visual arts to demonstrate what they learned in their study of Indian history and culture; and the 7<sup>th</sup> graders put on a play that explored themes related to the ending of the war in Iraq. To make money for the school, a number of student paintings were on display and bid upon through a silent auction, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders sold copies of two movies they made related to their study of HIV and a CD of peace songs they made in a professional recording studio. Other performances included the Ballet Folklórico Arco Iris, and a school guitar club. In addition to the performances and displays that occurred throughout the school, each individual classroom had exhibitions related to specific areas of study of that class. These tended to be the most strictly academic exhibits and were based on math, reading, social studies and science.

As mentioned, however, one of my main interests in attending these events was to observe ways culture and nationality play out in family engagement with schooling and

their children's education. For example, while based on both my observations and focus group discussions it was clear that a large number of Mexican immigrant parents actually attended the family nights, I was curious to know what parents and their children identified as helpful and limiting to their relationship with the school (as opposed to simply observing the performances or socializing). Also, I was interested in seeing what levels of understanding parents seemed to have regarding student work on display and this understanding might be helpful for them to become better supporters of their children's learning, while making meaning of their engagement.

While these are important questions, they are also very difficult to explore. In retrospect, had I anticipated the importance of the family curriculum nights beforehand, I might have formulated some direct questions about them in my interviews in order to get better information about parent reactions to them. For example, anticipating that the student-led conferences might have some effect on parents' ability to support student learning, I often asked parents about whether or not they gleaned insights or learned new strategies for helping their child at home from the conferences. I did this less so in regards to the family nights. This was because, at the time I conducted most of the parent interviews, I had not yet realized the potential impact of the family nights on their ability to support student learning at home. When I did ask the Mexican parents about the family nights, they typically indicated that they enjoyed the events and learned some things about what their children were doing in school, but could not identify specific ways that they had changed support of their students.

Thus, in order to make determinations about parent engagement in the family nights, I will have to rely heavily on what I observed directly. Overall, the majority of



Mexican immigrant parents were engaged at *some* level in their children's learning. Since every child at the school had work on display, what seemed most typical was that parents viewed a couple of performances, ate some food, socialized with other parents or adults, and— usually led by their child— viewed the work that their particular student had done. What was less clear was the degree to which parents engaged with the rest of the work being displayed. In some cases, I saw adults— sometimes parents and other times teachers or educators from other schools— examining exhibits on their own. A fairly small minority of these parents actually took the time to read the descriptions of the work in detail or spent considerable time looking at numerous exhibits that belonged to other people's children. Many of these exhibits included a reference to the concepts that were taught, the related standards, or the evolution of the project itself.

The issue of what families actually saw came up at the first staff meeting following the second family night I observed. Here, teachers spent a good portion of the meeting reflecting upon how the event. As they discussed the event, I recorded some of their main observations:

- Several teachers indicated that the event seemed more manageable than past ones (despite the large number of exhibits and performances that I observed it had apparently been scaled down a bit from the last family night) and thus the activities and displays were more focused and selective. In addition to lightening some of the load for teachers, the staff felt that this had made the event a little less overwhelming for parents.
- There was some discussion about certain classrooms receiving more attention than others. This was partly due to greater physical accessibility

of some classrooms and the presence of a theatrical performance going on in one classroom. There was some consensus that more attention should be paid in future to ensure that the event is structured for a better distribution of visitors among classrooms.

- Finally, there was some discussion about some activities/exhibits appearing more "parent-friendly" than others. Specifically, some of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade class exhibits seemed to attract more prolonged attention from parents. In particular, teachers pointed out a 6<sup>th</sup> grade exhibit which consisted of a large, richly-illustrated storyboard created by students. Not only was the content of the display easy to grasp, but portions of it were in Spanish (in one of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes, students did the majority of their work in Spanish). While the staff did not discuss this issue in much depth, there was a clear implication that some of the upper-grade exhibits were very challenging for many parents who spoke little English and/or had had little formal education themselves.

Related to some of the above points, I also noticed that few portions of the event were translated for non-English speaking parents. Some of the student work, as mentioned, was done in Spanish and, in some cases, descriptions of student work was translated into Spanish and displayed with the work (in the same way a museum exhibit would have a description of the item being displayed). However, for the most part, displays were presented in English exclusively. Performances were also done in English and, in a number of cases, the Master of Ceremonies introducing a performance did not provide a Spanish-language introduction.

The issue of helping parents with limited formal education gain access to some of the more sophisticated activities and exhibits (for example, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math and science exhibits) clearly posed a serious challenge. In a couple of classrooms, this was addressed by having student docents lead visitors around the room and explain the work that was on display. For example, students were available in one of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade rooms to describe not only their own work, but the work of the entire class. In this classroom, the visitor could choose from an English or Spanish-speaking student to provide the tour. However, other than that example (and in addition to the general work teachers did in grade-level meetings or conferences throughout the year), the staff did not seem to have any specific strategies for helping parents absorb some of the more challenging material at the family night event.

There was some evidence that, at least in terms of the more accessible activities and exhibits, parents were gaining a better understanding and appreciation of the school's curriculum. For example, in her interview, the parent of a 7<sup>th</sup> grader talked about the fact that she was skeptical about the amount of art that students were exposed to at the school. While virtually all parents thought art was a good idea, not all immediately saw how this work was contributing to their academic development. In her view, the interdisciplinary nature of the expositions and the prominent role that artistic expression played in communicating student learning in core academic subjects helped her and other parents understand its role and why it was that teachers placed so much emphasis in this area.

#### Patterns of Involvement

While it seems clear that the school successfully engages a fairly large number of parents in deep and important ways, Lobo Middle School also continues to face real

challenges in evenly engaging parents across lines of race and gender. Overall, it could be said that while there has been deepening engagement of some Mexican immigrant parents over time, the base of parent involvement has expanded in only limited ways. In order to characterize these dynamics, I will describe some of the key ways in which parent involvement at Lobo Middle School has deepened over time, and then indicate some of the ways in which the school continues to struggle with engaging the full spectrum of parents.

### Deepening Involvement

The quality of Mexican parent involvement improved in several ways from one year to the next. First, over time, new parents became engaged in ways they had not been before; second, some Mexican parents who were already engaged deepened their involvement, at times resulting in considerable personal development; and third, there were indications that, as a whole, parents began to develop a greater sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of students and the school community at large.

In my interviews, a number of Mexican immigrant parents talked about the fact that they had never been so involved in their children's school as they had been at Lobo Middle School. In some cases, parents tried to be involved at previous schools, but had been discouraged by apathetic school personnel or the general dysfunction of the school environment. In other cases, they did not try particularly hard to be involved and had never been encouraged to do so. One example of a newly-involved Mexican parent was the father of a sixth grade student who was surprised<sup>o</sup> at first unpleasantly<sup>o</sup> by his child's teacher's attempts to engage him. Speaking of his son's teacher, he said the following:

At the beginning I had many problems with her because there was an issue with my son. She even called me on my cell phone when I was on the road, working in another city, and I would get upset that she was bothering me because I didn't understand what she was trying to do. And now I understand what she wanted for my son. I understood and I apologized to her personally. "I apologize, teacher, I didn't understand what you wanted. I thought that you just wanted to get on my case as a parent"<sup>7</sup>.

A year after those early communications with the teacher, the father described his and his wife's relationship with her: "And now we know each other well. I see the teacher as if we have a close friendship" we've never been to each other's homes, but we have that type of friendship."<sup>8</sup>

In other cases, Mexican parents were very involved in the school from the beginning, but deepened their involvement considerably during their time at the school. In many respects, the increasing independence that Mexican immigrant parent leaders developed on the Leadership Team was strongly encouraged by both, the family liaison and administration over time. Senor Castañon, in particular, was clear that his main function as a school community liaison was to develop leadership among parents at the school, while maintaining the family center, running workshops, and coordinating a variety of services for parents.

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<sup>7</sup> Al principio yo tuve muchos problemas con ella porque yo trabajaba en las calles y habia un problema de mi hijo. Inclusive me hablaba para el celular, y yo a veces que andaba por alla Redwood City, Palo Alto y ahi me enojaba que me molestara, pero yo no entendia el proposito de ella. Y ya comprendi lo que ella queria para mi hijo. Comprendi y yo le pedi disculpas personalmente. "Perdoneme, maestra, no comprendia lo que Usted queria. Yo pense que nomas queria estar molestando a uno como ella

<sup>8</sup> Y ya nos conocemos bien. Veo a la maestra como si tuvieramos una amistad de casa aunque no nos conocemos las casas pero tenemos esa amistad.

While several parents confirmed they had indeed begun to take greater initiative and independence in their involvement, at Lobo Middle School, by the end of the school's second nine weeks, there was little sense that any of the parents were yet ready to fill Senor Castañon's shoes. In addition, relatively few parents were heavily involved in school-wide leadership roles (which may explain the fact that only 32% of the parents in the school quality survey indicated they felt they had "input"). Related to this, when asked in interviews, there were fairly mixed reactions from parents at large regarding the degree to which they felt that they had a "voice" in the school. In most cases, Mexican immigrant parents simply felt that other parents were so happy with Lobo Middle School, that they did not have much occasion to exercise that voice in ways which would create waves within the school community.

Nonetheless, there were clear indications that at least a handful of parent leaders were making significant strides in terms of their own growth and confidence. For example, one Mexican parent leader who was employed as an after-school volunteer and, over time, became increasingly engaged in the school's political advocacy, and talked about the ways in which she had grown as a person through her work at the school. Speaking about her experiences meeting with local and state politicians about issues affecting Lobo Middle School, this mother reflected on her growing confidence.

I never thought that I would find myself talking to a politician—it would never have crossed my mind. I thought that, in the moment, I would never be able to talk or express myself in the way that I wanted. But no, in other

words, you get used to it and learn to express yourself; and now, I'm not perfect, but I don't get so uptight as last year.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking about her work as an after-school volunteer, she made similar comments:

I've learned how to work with different children and I've learned to have patience— which I never thought I'd be able to have— and to get to know them more individually and how to be with them in one way or another. Because, before, I never would have thought that I could be with 15 or 18 kids at once. And I never thought that I could be competent with so many kids because, with five at home, well, it seemed like that was enough and I probably wouldn't be able to deal with more kids . . . My life has changed a lot because I've become more sure of myself. And I like it because I do it for the good of the children; I don't just focus on my children anymore, but on others, too, because I know that my daughters don't need as much as other children. So, that's made me want to help the parents of those children to help their own children. Because not all of the children have the support of their parents, so that's had such an impact on me because I'm always worrying about everyone else.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Yo nunca espere que iba a andar con un politico hablando. Ni por mi mente pasaria. Crei que al momento de tener a una persona asi en frente de mi, no iba a poder a hablarlo que yo sentia o expresarme de la manera que yo queria. Pero no, o sea, como que te vas familiarizando y nas aprendiendo a desenvolverte y yo ahorita no soy perfecta pero digo al menos ya no me siento con tanta pena como el ano pasado.

<sup>10</sup> He aprendido como trabajar con diferentes ninos y he aprendido a tener la paciencia que no crei que la iba a tener, y conocerlos mas individualmente y como poder estar con ellos de una manera o de otra. Porque yo antes nunca hubiera pensado que pudiera estar con 15 o 18 ninos a la vez. Y nunca crei que iba a ser competente estar con tantos ninos porque, con cinco en mi casa, pues se me hacia que era suficiente y que a lo mejor, yo no iba a tolerar mas ninos . . . Mi vida ha cambiado mucho porque me hice como mas segura de mi misma. Y me gusta lo que hago por el bien de los ninos. Que no me enfoco nada mas en mis hijos si no que en los demas tambien porque yo se que mis hijas no necesitan tanto como otros ninos,

Role of School Community Culture in Parental Engagements and School Partnerships

The above quote, in addition to capturing this particular parent's widening perspective about her role in the school, reflects a central challenge described by both Sr. Castañon and the assistant principal. As both indicated, they struggled mightily to get parents to begin thinking beyond their advocacy for their own children and to take increasing responsibility for the school community as a whole. At the end of the school's first nine weeks, Sr. Castañon described the state of parent consciousness in this regard.

To be honest, I think that we are still not thinking as a community. I mean, I don't think we can call ourselves a community school if we don't think as a community. A community takes responsibility and ownership for its community— all members of its community, and this includes all races and cultures. And parents aren't doing that right now. They take responsibility and ownership for their kid. Some take an additional step; some take an additional ten steps; but the majority of them are still very focused on "this is my kid and I take responsibility for my kid."

By way of example, Senor Castañon talked about parents who, during the course of the year, wanted the school to take an especially hard line with student discipline. In his view, many parents' vision was that Lobo Middle School would become a quasi-private school where students who did not "toe the line" would be kicked out. This was an area where, as the principal, he felt he needed to hold his ground and insisted that

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entonces eso me ha hecho como querer ayudar a los padres de esos niños a que ayuden a sus hijos. Porque no todos los niños tienen el apoyo de los padres entonces como que eso me ha impresionado tanto que siempre me ando preocupando por los demás.



Lobo's real mission was to enter to learn and leave to serve— even the most troubled and challenging in the school.

By the end of second nine weeks, Senor Castañon and the assistant principal both indicated that, though there was still much work to be done in this area, many parents had actually began to expand their field of concern so that they no longer merely advocated for their own children, but began to push policies or take actions that suggested a concern for the community as a whole. In some cases, this manifested itself when parents became more willing to discipline children other than their own. One mother described this:

I love the way the parents interact with one another— and parents with the children. If a parent sees my child doing something she's not supposed to do, it's okay to tell my child, and that's the same way most of the parents here feel. If you see my child doing something wrong, you know, tell them something, in a positive way; tell them that they are doing something wrong, and there's no problem with it.

Senor Castañon talked about this same dynamic.

Well, this year I've seen more of the Mexican immigrant parents coming and working, or just simply coming to school. I hear when they speak to a child, "Go to class" or "your teacher is talking to you" or "what are you doing here?" and it's not necessarily the son or daughter of that father or mother. Before, people didn't feel comfortable talking to someone's else's child and calling their attention to something. Now they do.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bueno este ano he visto mas que los padres que vienen y trabajan o que vienen simplemente a la escuela. Escucho cuando le hablan a un nino, "Vete a tu salon" o "te hablo tu maestra" o "que estas haciendo aqui?"

The assistant principal described one particularly dramatic case where parents and community members offered extensive mentoring support to an especially troubled boy in the school. A recent immigrant, thirteen years old in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and illiterate in both English and Spanish, this boy had virtually no parental support at home and was having serious behavioral and academic problems at school.

He's the kind of kid who should never have made it. He's the kid the system has nothing for— just nothing— you know? And his mother could care less about him— and he obviously needs some nurturing and it's got to come from someone who speaks his language. So, it was hard for me to play that role. So other parents accepted him: another parent that he's close to, a community member who was on the Cuban basketball team, who's a very strong Latino role model. But other people accept him, too. And I think that has made all the difference for him— almost becoming his surrogate mother. Other parents have developed relationships with him and it's become incredibly important. So, parent involvement isn't just about those parents' kids benefiting, but also about other kids benefiting. So, now, he can come to school; he can focus; he can be respectful; he can learn; he can sit still. And in September, he couldn't do any of those things.

Senor Castañon provided some other, more subtle, bits of evidence of how parents were taking on wider responsibility within the school such as the recent family nights

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No necesariamente es el hijo o hija de ese papa o esa mama, lo que anteriormente la gente tenia cierta preocupacion de hablarle a otro nino que no fuera el de el y llamarle la atencion, ahorita no.

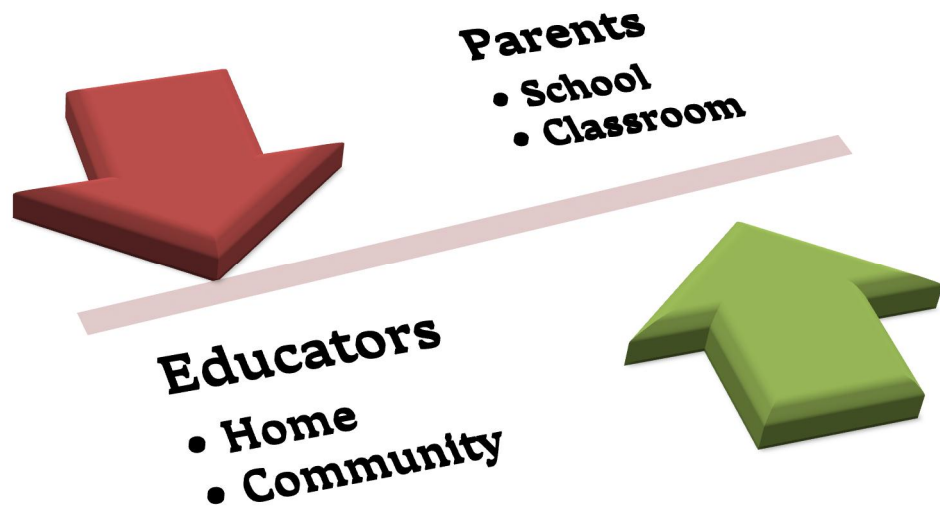
where a number of parents worked, selling food and providing other services, in effect sacrificing time that could have been spent viewing their own students' exhibits. Talking about his own work to help foster this type of consciousness among parents, he described sharing his own transformation with them.

I know that sometimes I sound like a broken record, repeating the same thing over and over, but the Mexican immigrant parents, little by little, are understanding. Because it's very difficult to come outside of one's self; I think that, for me, the biggest challenge was to come outside of myself and understand that it wasn't just my son or my daughter who I should be concerned about. I went through the same thing that the Mexican parents are going through now, so it's something that takes time and requires a learning process.<sup>12</sup>

Getting parents to make this transition seems to have been the product of Senor Castañón's ongoing work and also a product of the growing trust and comfort parents felt at the school. The father who was at first suspicious of teacher outreach and eventually became an active member of the school community is an example of this. With greater trust, parents spent more time at the school and felt more responsible to those in the school community.

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<sup>12</sup> Yo se que a veces ya parezco hasta un disco que esta repitiendo lo mismo pero que los padres poco a poco estan entendiendo. Porque es muy difcil salir de uno mismo; yo creo que para mi, el reto mas grande fue salir de mi mismo y entender que no era solamente mi hijo o mi hija a que me debia de importar. Yo pase lo mismo que estan pasando los padres ahorita, asi que es algo que toma tiempo y que es necesario que haya un proceso de aprendizaje.



#### Limits of Involvement

While there were some very compelling developments in terms of parent involvement during the course of the school's first semesters, there were also a number of limitations in the school's engagement with Mexican immigrant families. One limitation I observed was the noticeably fewer Mexican immigrant parents at the school than other Latino parents (even in proportion to their overall numbers at the school). Virtually everyone I interviewed acknowledged this fact and several people offered varying explanations for this phenomenon. Senor Castañon, for example, theorized that since many of the Mexican immigrant families came from one-parent homes and were more focused on meeting basic economic needs, they had a harder time getting to school functions. He also commented that it seemed that many of these parents had "faith in the system" and that they didn't always have to attend to demonstrate their involvement. He also mentioned the language gap as well as the fact that, culturally, they were not used to

participating in ways they were being asked to participate at Lobo Middle School.

Particularly in terms of the political activity, he pointed out that many of these parents coming from a country like Mexico with histories of political repression and where this type of activity could be severely punished.

In addition to Senor Castañon, I asked five Mexican immigrant parents about their thoughts on the matter. Two of the Mexican immigrant parents did not have explanations for this; however the other three Mexican immigrant parent leaders mentioned the fact that the school was very "Spanish-centric" and that many of the Spanish speaking families felt comfortable at the school. According to one of the Mexican parent leaders, at least one English parent approached her, saying that even though she was generally happy with the school and agreed with its philosophy, she was considering taking her child out. Interestingly, however, the parent leader's solution to bridging this cultural gap was not that the school community uniformly use more English, but that it provide classes for parents to learn new languages so that, for example, she and other parents could learn Spanish.

Of the participation of other Mexican immigrant parents, one mother I spoke to pointed out that many parents worked nights (and were often not able to show up at the school) and that many were not very vocal due to their inability to communicate well in English. However, she also emphasized that "though it was a less conspicuous form of involvement" these parents did make donations to the school. When I asked her what types of things could be done to get more Mexican immigrant parents involved at the school, she indicated that, though most Mexican parents already felt quite comfortable at Lobo Middle School, the establishment of trust was the most important factor.

For me, it is like you need to have somebody they can trust and with good reputation in the school. The Mexican parents listen to whatever you say but if you do not have a good reputation or speak to them in a disrespectful way or simply if one day you say this and the next day you say that the parents cannot trust you and they are not going to participate.

Another Mexican immigrant parent emphasized some of the same obstacles to their participation such as the language gap and their culturally-based apprehension to school involvement and added the point that many Mexican parents were disadvantaged by the fact that they could not drive. She also distinguished between recent immigrants and those, like herself, who had been in the U.S. for a longer time. When I asked her how she thought more Mexican immigrant parents might be engaged, she said the following:

I think, if we give them more time and just continue inviting them in, and say, "you're welcome, this is different from your country" and give them that assurance, I think they will be more open to us. They will come to us more. And once in a blue moon, you find one of those like me who needs a lot and asks a lot. And, hopefully more of us will come through. I mean, I speak for other parents. I speak for myself. I speak for my peers. I can't just let one child go without saying so-and-so or doing certain something that you need. Because I've lived through a war. I've lived through deaths. I lived through violence. I lived through all of that. So, I can't just let that one slide. Especially the children. All kids are my kids.

Even more imbalanced than parental involvement along racial lines was the differential participation based on gender. Even the most casual observer would quickly notice that there were far more mothers than fathers at the school at any given time or event. A number of parents commented on this trend as well. This is also partly reflected in the fact that, out of the 15 highly-involved parents who I interviewed, only one of them was a father—the gentleman who was doing the soccer coaching. When I interviewed him, he confirmed that there were very few fathers who participated consistently in school events, indicating that there were only about three or four other fathers who regularly showed up for parent meetings. When I asked the father why he thought this was, he was not sure, but that it probably had to do with the traditional values of the parents and the fact that many men considered it to be the woman's job to be involved in their children's schooling.

When I asked him what could be done to bring in more fathers, he said that he would like for the principal to work on ways to better motivate them. He also suggested sending letters to the fathers encouraging them to participate, particularly in relation to their children's sports. Others also observed that many of the Mexican mothers did not have full-time jobs, were able to devote more time to their families, and consequently had more opportunity to come to school. As is the case with other less-visible parents, this does not mean that fathers were not actively involved with their children's education at home or did not contribute in other ways—for example, through donations to the school as many of the Mexican parents did—but simply that they were far less visible at the school.

Though Senor Castañon, administration, and parents all observed the lower levels of visible participation among fathers and Mexican immigrant families, it did not seem that anyone had any concrete plan or solution in place for bolstering the involvement of these groups. At the end of the semester, Sr. Castañon and the assistant principal, in particular, talked about wanting to spend some time on the issue of better targeting these groups. However, as Sr. Castañon explained at the end of the second nine weeks, due largely to the political mobilizing efforts and financial crisis, a number of parental engagement initiatives had fallen by the wayside. Thus, by the end of the school's second nine weeks, not much had changed in terms of the patterns of involvement in the school.



## CHAPTER 5 EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

### Teaching

Overall, few of the people I interviewed thought that parent involvement had much, if any, impact on the quality of teaching at the school. Most Mexican parents, when asked, talked about the impact they felt their involvement had on student learning or, in some cases, on the emotional or moral support they thought it gave to teachers or other school staff; however, none claimed that it had a significant impact on the content or style of teachers' instruction.

The following comment was typical of the teachers I interviewed:

Not a huge amount [of influence]. I mean, once in a while I'll have a Spanish speaking parent point out something about their child that I hadn't noticed before, but for the most part, I don't think it has a huge effect on how I teach because, for the most part, parents seem pretty satisfied with what I am doing. So, it's not like I get a lot of feedback from them like "Oh, you know, I wish you would change this" or whatever. I don't think so. I mean I tend to make decisions based on what I see after assessing the child a number of different ways and then also trying to, you know, take my professional development I've had and our philosophy at this school and things from books I've read and use that to make my decision on how I'm going to teach. And there is not a whole lot of conversation with parents about that part— you know, the education of the child.

Quite often, this question about Mexican parents' influence on their teaching elicited long pauses from teachers. In a couple of cases, teachers vacillated back and

forth in their answers— a bit unsure of parental impact. In this vein, a couple of teachers talked about subtle or “subconscious” effects that parental involvement had on their teaching, but could not really identify anything very concrete.

I think [the effect is] just more of a consciousness that they are there and that they are connected to the work that the kids are doing, and I think that that is the effect it has on me— just my way of teaching and bringing in their family into their work, you know. And a lot of the kids’ work is very self-directed and it’s all about their relationships and their families and things like that and so, you know, them being able to bring that in. So, I wouldn’t say it’s in a very concrete way. Like I said, it’s more in a subconscious way.

I don’t think it does. I wonder if, subconsciously, where there is a group of people who are helping out and participating here and that just reminds me that it is that much more important to really make sure that there is a solid education here. But I would be doing that anyway. I think that it is just sort of a reminder, and almost— not a thank you to me— but sort of a support that they are involved.

In a couple of cases, teachers talked about how the presence of Mexican parents contributed to their sense of accountability for the quality of their teaching; even here, however, it was typically not enough to actually influence their pedagogy or curriculum in significant ways.

I don’t know if it does [have an impact]; I guess it does. I don’t know if it’s the parent involvement or it’s— I feel personally you cannot have

down days or down time here. You would never give the kids a Xerox copy of something to color for two minutes. No, no, no, to that extent you got to keep it together, and that's good. I know I have a couple of Spanish speaking mothers who stay by the front door every morning just to see how it's starting, and never have I had that, and it's fine. But I think you got to be on top of it, and that's OK.

I think teachers feel more accountable to parents and feel like, I mean the sixth grade parents look at a lot of the students' work and that is somewhere definitely in my brain.

In a couple of other cases, teachers talked about how Mexican families and their parental involvement some two of the teachers had Mexican parents participating in their classrooms as instructional aides— usually taking small groups of Spanish monolingual students so that they could work with others. Aside from these types of involvement, however, it was fairly rare that Mexican parents would visit classrooms at all. When it did occur, it tended to be at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level and often consisted of parents who arrived a bit early to pick up their students.

For example, one teacher mentioned that she had a few Mexican mothers who often hung around in the doorway of her classroom for fifteen or twenty minutes in the mornings after dropping off their children; however, according to the teacher, these mothers never made any comments to the teacher about what they observed. In addition, in my interviews, I did not encounter any instances in which Mexican immigrant parents brought up significant criticisms or concerns about what they observed in classrooms. The lack of parental presence in classrooms (and the lack of critique of any kind about instruction) was fairly surprising to me given the attention that the school was paying to parental

involvement in the academic life of the school. In some ways, this was even more ironic given the fact that administration was engaged in training parents from other schools in methods for analyzing and critiquing classroom instruction.

Ultimately, besides the fact that parents at Lobo Middle School were not being explicitly trained to do this type of work—the lack of parental attention to the specifics of classroom instruction seemed to derive from 1) the high levels of trust they had in Lobo Middle School teachers, and 2) the lack of formal schooling that many Mexican parents at the school had, which was compounded by the fact that the quality of teaching at Lobo Middle School is generally quite high and thus, in some instances, challenging for some professional educators to critique. I will explore these limitations in parental influence on teaching in more detail later on this chapter.

### Learning

While the individuals I interviewed were typically unable to identify concrete ways in which parental involvement influenced classroom instruction, a number of Mexican parents and teachers talked about the ways in which they thought parents had real influence on the quality of student learning. As one teacher put it, “I don’t think it [parent involvement] is critical for my ability to teach students, but I think it is critical for the students in order to get the most out of school possible.” Thus, while the quality of teaching is often measured by the quality of learning that takes place, the point that this teacher (and others) tried to make was that Mexican immigrant parents could have a substantial impact on the amount that students were able to glean from the instruction that was taking place in school.

For example, a number of teachers talked about ways individual students' parents helped get students to behave better in class, get to school on time, and turn in their homework. In some cases, these benefits were described as being the result of parents holding students accountable for their learning.

The kids have much more of a sense that they are also accountable to their parents for their education and it's not just sort of this thing that stays in school and once they leave it's over with. And I do think that it is much more powerful with the little kids than with the middle schoolers, but they still talk about "I really want my mom to be proud of me, I'm doing this so that my parents will give me fifty dollars if I get good grades" and, it just seems like they really do have a sense that it's the teachers, it's them, and it's their parents' and we're working together on this. I think it [parent involvement] gives the kid the feel that when they do something wrong, everybody here ends up finding out about. Most of the families, all of the teachers, everybody. So, anybody can walk in and say, "Hey, I heard you did this. What's that about?" Another part of it is the accountability. Like, there are a fair amount of students who act out at different times, but the students who have a parent at home who reinforces the discipline I encourage in the classroom, reinforces the work I assign, and they're more likely to bounce back the next day and be refocused and to be more committed to achievement. Whereas, the students who don't have that reinforcement at home, I kind of feel like the school is the only disciplinary factor in their lives, and it's hard to keep them focused.

A couple of bilingual teachers gave specific examples of how parental involvement (and a positive relationship with a child's teacher) promoted greater accountability and/or motivation on the part of the student. One teacher described how a particular parent-teacher conference with one student's grandmother precipitated a greater presence of the grandmother at the school which made the student more attentive to her school work.

Something changed around October where she [the grandmother] started coming into the classroom and saying, "What did you guys do today?" and "what is she working on and did she do a good job?" And it meant so much to Juanita. And it's not like there's been this sudden, miraculous change in her, but a number of things that have happened— but I think there was something about her just seeing us talking together and having a conversation about her, and it not always being bad, so that now, any days that I have a conversation with her grandmother, the work that she brings in the next day is better. And I don't think it's because the grandmother stands over her and has her do the work, because I'm not sure that the grandmother is able to provide that level of support. It's more like, we've talked about it, and it becomes important to her. So, that would be like the biggest or most obvious example I can think of.

Multiple examples of this type imply that parents either motivated or held students accountable for studying, but did not necessarily actually aid students in doing the work. This dynamic, of course, varied from parent to parent. In a number of cases, teachers talked about the fact that parents seemed to have a difficult time helping students directly

with their work, particularly in the upper grades where the work has become more sophisticated. Since my study was primarily focused on the ways parents were having an impact on the school itself, however, I did not collect sufficient data in order to make strong statements about the ways and degrees to which parents were or were not supporting student learning at home.

Clearly, however, a number of Mexican parents believed that they learned ways from teachers— particularly through student-led conferences or other meetings with school staff— of helping their students at home. Two Mexican mothers of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, for example, described specific suggestions teachers gave them for ways to help their children with homework.

[The teacher] tells me that my boy is not doing well in reading, or that he's not expressing himself with her. She says, "you have to help me with him," and I talk to him and then she also tells me, "OK, the homework is like this and you're going to do it the same way with the other teacher, too." Also, she gave me a math book so that we could work together all year on the homework. And sometimes my son brought his homework and said, "oh, Mom, I don't understand this," and I would take out the book that the teacher gave me and would start looking through it. "Oh, let's check here, we're going to do it, you'll see." The teacher gave me that book and it has helped me a lot.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [La maestra] me dice que el niño anda mal en su lectura, o que no se expresa con ella, que le hace más falta hablar con ella. Me dice, "necesitas ayudarme en esto con el niño," y yo hablo con el niño y también me dice ella, "OK, las tareas son así vas a hacer y también con la otra maestra." Inclusive, me dio un libro de matemática para que trabajáramos todo el año con las tareas. Y a veces, [mi hijo] tenía su tarea y decía,

[The teacher told us] that we have him practice and talk to him about the homework, talk a little about the topic. What I am talking to him about now is *areas*—now I've forgotten—areas and *polygons*, and about the books that he's struggling with.<sup>14</sup>

While a number of Mexican parents talked about supporting student learning at home, it was usually difficult for me to assess how effective this support actually was. From the teachers' perspective the effects of this type of support varied. At the middle school level, in particular, teachers often expressed real uncertainty about the degrees to which Mexican parents were supporting student learning at home and, in some cases, questioned the real impact that engaging Mexican parents would have on student learning at all. One teacher mentioned that she had not seen any real changes in student performance or motivation after the first round of progress report conferences with parents. When I asked her about the impact that Mexican parent involvement had on student learning, in general, she was skeptical.

I don't know. You know, I don't really know how it all fits in with the middle school and the parents. I don't really feel like it's coming from the parents when I've seen changes in the kids and things like that. I know that's what the research shows and everything, but I am kind of unsure about that one. Again, I don't feel like the kids that have become really

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Oh Mami, es que no le entiendo aqui, y yo sacaba mi libro que me dio la maestra y andaba buscando, Oh, vamos a chequear aqui, vamos a hacerlo, vas a ver. Ese libro me lo dio la maestra y pues siempre me han ayudado mucho.

<sup>14</sup> [El maestro nos dijo] que tenemos que ponerlo a practicar y hablar con el sobre las tareas, discutir un poco el tema. Ahorita lo que le estoy hablando es de *areas* y *ya se me olvido*—areas y polimetros, y sobre la lectura de los libros en que el necesita ayuda.



motivated who have gone up three grade levels that it came at all from their family.

Another teacher was skeptical about the impact of progress report conferences and the Mexican parents' contributions to student learning as well. Describing past conferences, she said the following:

Basically, I read the [report card] comments. We talk about the grades. They're like, 'are they doing good or are they doing bad?' And that's it. I think in the younger classes the report card conferences can be really powerful because the kids show them what they're doing, and they can actually read for them, and they can actually show them math work. I tried that in the very first conference I did, and the mom's eyes just like totally started to glaze over. Her kid was like, 'and this is a stem and leaf plot, and this is when we graph an x, y coordinate, and'

When I asked her if it had been a challenge to get parents to understand what she was trying to do in the classroom, she said the following:

That's interesting. I think that, from my perspective as a math teacher, sometimes I don't really bother at this point. Because it's one thing to be like, yes, you can help your kids add or count things or tell time, but I don't expect the parents to help their kids graph linear equations. So, I don't think the content is as important as letting them know what their homework should look like. So, they can be like, 'this is too messy' or 'you know, this is the format that she likes it in. You need to keep it like

this.ö So, they can look it over. That, to me, is more important than the content of math.

This issue of parent expertise (or lack thereof) in relation to the academic work being done in school was a recurring issue throughout my interviews and is something that I will return to in this chapter.

### Relational Trust

In addition to its relative effects on teaching and learning, teachers and Mexican parents talked about how parental involvement had an impact on the quality of relationships and the overall sense of community within the school. I emphasize the overall tone and sense of community that exists in the school in this chapter including the issue of relationships, because, in addition to the inherent benefits that positive relationships provide in any community, it is also true that they can also influence the quality of teaching and learning in a school. While many educators have long espoused the beneficial impact of positive relationships on school climate and, ultimately, a school's ability to develop a strong academic culture, a recent book supports these claims with new empirical evidence.

At Lobo Middle School, the elements of relational trust as described by Bryk and Schneider seemed clearly evident within the school community. Specifically, Mexican parents overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction, trust, and appreciation for teachers. Similarly, students, in various ways, expressed and demonstrated trust in school staff (almost certainly due both to parents' expressions of trust in school staff as well as students' own direct experiences with them). In addition, for the most part, school staff seemed to have a fairly healthy degree of trust in parents (though, as mentioned, this did

vary somewhat since, for example, middle school teachers seemed less certain of parents' competence in supporting student learning and, in some cases, were not convinced that time spent engaging parents was very helpful). However, as described earlier, the overall sense of trust within the school was undeniable, creating a sense of social well being and contentment that permeates virtually all aspects of school life.

### Bridging the Gap

Based on my interviews, observations, and focus groups, it seems evident that, overall, Mexican immigrant family engagement at Lobo Middle School has had varied effects on student learning. First, there is evidence that parent involvement contributed to a general sense of community and social well being at the school—a state of what Bryk and Schneider would call high "relational trust" which, in conjunction with other factors, is likely to have had some measure of effect on the school's ability to produce high quality teaching and learning. Second, there is evidence that Mexican parent involvement had some effect on student learning; specifically, both parents and teachers generally agreed that parental involvement served to both motivate and hold students accountable for putting forth effort in their work. In some cases, there was also evidence that activities such as student-led conferences, Professional Learning Community grade-level meetings, and family curriculum nights may have enhanced parents' ability to support student learning at home. Finally, however, there was little evidence that parent involvement had any impact on the content or style of the teaching that went on at the school. This finding is based on the fact that parents very rarely visited classrooms, typically did not raise issues of concern regarding curriculum or pedagogy with teachers

in great depth, and the fact that teachers were hard-pressed to identify any concrete ways in which parent involvement influenced their teaching.

Because the original aim of this study was to determine in what ways, if any, parent involvement was having an impact on raising student achievement including the quality of teaching and learning at the school, I am interested in further exploring why this impact was limited, and what might be done to bolster it. Lobo Middle School is unique because it is clearly stretching the limits of what is traditionally considered possible in urban public schools. Nonetheless, in order to fulfill the mission of the school much is left to do.

Ultimately, although significant progress has been made in this area, the primary step that is required in order to take parent involvement to the next level at Lobo Middle School is for teachers to *engage Mexican parents more substantially in the academic life of the school*. One challenge implicit in this work is that, while school professionals are generally interested in involving parents meaningfully in the work of teaching and learning, it is still very evident that Mexican parents continue to struggle with the curriculum—particularly at higher-grade levels. As one middle school teacher said, she often had the experience of seeing parents' eyes glaze over when she or a student tried to explain the work they were doing in class. This challenge is complicated by the fact that Lobo Middle School has a particularly rigorous curriculum and a particularly strong professional teaching culture which, from a technical point of view, is not easily accessible to most lay people. Adding to this the fact that most Lobo Middle School parents are not native English speakers and have relatively little formal education, the challenges of bridging parent and teacher cultures at the school become even more acute.

One of the most interesting examples of the ways teachers struggled to get Mexican parents to understand what was happening in the classroom occurred during the 7<sup>th</sup> grade's study of the war in Iraq. This case is particularly interesting because it not only illustrates some of the challenges involved in engaging Mexican parents in some very substantive instructional work, but it provides some hints about how some of these challenges could be overcome.

For a lot of parents, it seemed to us that there was too much time being spent talking about the war, because we didn't understand the purpose of the study. So, the kids came home to us everyday with homework about the ending of a war - they had to watch the news, read the paper, and do homework about the war. And there was a protest march and all of the kids from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade went, and I was worried. And I decided to skip work in order to go with them because I didn't want my son to go alone, and also, I had a lot of questions about that study which had already gone on several months, you know? So, when I got back from the march, I felt bad about a lot of things; it made a big impression on me. All of the kids' work made an impression on me - the dialogue they had going on with the children in Iraq. I am emotional - in an emotional sense, I was very affected. And I went to go talk to the assistant principal and I said, "Do you know what? I think they're going too far with that and I don't agree with it. So, she told me, "well, go talk to the teacher." But, at the same time, other parents were saying to me, "why are they teaching so much about the war?" That happened on the same day because the protest came

out in the paper and all that, so the parents started to react. But finally, I realized that they had had that concern for a while, the same as me.<sup>15</sup>

At that point, Senor Castañon approached the teacher and recommended that she convene a meeting with the parents of the class in order to explain why the class was focusing so much on the war. A number of parents attended the meeting and, according to Senor Castañon, the parents actually began to feel a bit more at ease about the project after hearing the teacher's explanation for what they were doing.

For me, it was an educational process— for me personally, but also the other parents felt proud about something that had been bothering them. It was bothering me— I was mad when I came that day [to the meeting].

But, afterwards, when I understood all that the kids had grown with that study and all that they had learned— to analyze the newspaper, to analyze the news, and to develop their ability to analyze— then I said, “oh, well, that's worth it.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Para muchos padres, se nos hizo demasiado lo que se estaba hablando de la guerra, porque no entendíamos cual era el proposito del estudio. Encotnces los ninos nos llegaban a la casa diario con tareas sobre la Guerra— tenían que mirar las noticias, mirar el periodico, y hacer tareas sobre la Guerra. Y hubo una marcha y todos los ninos de aqui del septimo grado fueron, y yo estaba preocupada— y yo decidi no trabajar para irme con ellos porque yo no queria que mi hijo fuera solo y, ademas, yo tenia muchas preguntas sobre ese estudio que ya tenia meses, verdad? Entonces, yo cuando regrese de la marcha, me sentia muy mal por muchas cosas, me impresiono mucho. Todo el trabajo de los ninos me impresiono mucho, el dialogo que ellos tenian con los ninos de Iraq. Yo soy emocional— como en el aspecto emocional me sentimuy afectada. Y yo fui y hable con la directora y le dije, “Sabes que? Yo creo que se estan iendo muy lejos con esto, y yo no estoy de acuerdo.” Entonces ella me dijo, “Pues, habla con la maestra.” Pero al mismo tiempo, otros padres me dijeron, “por que estan ensenando tanto la guerra?” Esos fueron el mismo dia porque como llegaron ellos de la marcha y salieron en el periodico y todo eso, entonces los padres empaezaron a reaccionar. Pero, al final, yo me di cuenta que esa preocupacion la venian cargando desde el principio, igual que yo.

<sup>16</sup> Para mi fue un proceso de educacion, para mi personalmente, pero tambien los demas padres se sintieron con orgullo de algo que les estaba ya molestando. A mi ya me estaba molestando. Yo ya estaba enojada cuando yo vine ese dia [a la junta]. Pero despues cuando lo entendi, todo lo que los ninos habian crecido

The fact that the teacher was ultimately able to convince Mexican parents of the merits of this curriculum is significant not only because of the educational process that Sr. Castañon described but because, presumably, if the parents had not been convinced, they could have forced the teacher to abandon the rest of the project. While parents do not technically have any sort of veto power over teachers' curricular decisions at Lobo Middle School, it seems quite likely that, given Sr. Castañon's clout in the school, and the collective influence of the other concerned parents, this group of Mexican parents would have been able to dissolve whatever remained of the teacher's plans. It is important here to remember that this was no ordinary class project; pictures of Lobo Middle School students carrying signs and marching in protest through the streets of the city had appeared in the city's *Journal* and, ultimately, students appeared on local television, spoke on local radio, and put on plays expressing their feelings and reflections about the war. It is thus quite conceivable that in another school, where parents had less trust in teachers and were less involved in the work going on in their children's school, those parents would have been less inclined to attend such a meeting or be swayed by the teacher's explanations.

In order to get her perspective on these events, I also spoke to the teacher who led the study on Iraq. In her interview, she spoke more generally about her frustrations in trying to get parents to understand the content of the work she was trying to do with her students.

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con ese estudio, y todo lo que aprendieron a analizar el periódico, a analizar las noticias, a desarrollar el sentido de analizar entonces yo dije, ¿oh, pues vale la pena.ö

How do we involve them [parents] in a meaningful way? How do we explain [to] these parents who have so little education and feel so intimidated and embarrassed, you know, how do we make it not so alienating to them, and just involve them more? You know, part of the reason I hate student-led conferences is because I feel like, either I'm speaking so simplistically to them, or it's, you know, I hate talking about the standards because then they just say, "is my kid being good?" And, I don't know. I think that what we expect in this school is in such contradiction to what they really want from their kids, and to the way that they were educated themselves and it's hard to spend the amount of time we need to convince them of why we're doing things so differently. They just really want their kids to be good. They want them to do what they're told and be good. And, you know, the Latina mothers who come in, they want to know if their girls are being good. And, in a lot of ways, I don't want my students to be good. I want them to challenge my authority and their parents' and everybody's and to vocalize it articulately and with good grammar!

From there, she began to talk specifically about the class's study of the war in Iraq. When I asked her what the key issues were in terms of her discussions with parents around the project, she said the following.

It was about kids being vocal and being public about their opinions. And a lot of the parents' approaches and concerns I totally understand. Being immigrants, and a lot of them not having secure legal statuses here, you



know, and that's completely legitimate. But it's been really challenging leading my students through really intensive critical thinking about our government in this country because a lot of what the message is from home is "this is the best country in the world and we're really lucky to live here." So, you know, then the kids were talking about, "I'm just arguing with my parents all the time." And it was really hard because the kids were saying things like, "I'm arguing with my parents all the time, and they only see what they see on the TV and they believe everything." And we did tons of critical media analysis, and so the kids were saying, "my parents just don't understand; they believe all these lies, and they think that, you know, they dismiss me." And then I think, you know, I see it from the parents' perspective: their kids are coming home and saying, "why are you being so dumb? You're just believing all these lies." So, you know, those were interesting discussions.

In addition to my own interpretation of why parents ultimately came to be supportive of the work (once the purpose of the project was explained to them), the teacher offered her own explanation. While some of it may have had to do with the foundational levels of trust that parents had at Lobo and its teachers, she argued that it also had to do with the fact that, in important ways, the parents could relate to the curriculum itself. Specifically, the political consciousness and activism that students were developing through this project mirrored much of the political activism that many of the school's parents were simultaneously involved in as they advocated for the school in

the midst of the larger financial and political crises that were unraveling within the school system.

It all happened simultaneously to the district falling short and all our efforts to be public and vocal about what was going on here. And so, you know, I think it was really clear to a lot of parents that that was what I was doing. You know, the war was just content, and what I was doing was about teaching kids critical thinking and to have a voice and to use it to learn how to be effective.

Beyond parents' ultimate decision to accept what this teacher was trying to do, this episode was significant in that it prompted some rather deep engagement between parents and faculty regarding the instructional content students received. Specifically, controversy surrounding the project prompted the teacher and parents to engage in rather nuanced discussions about the specific skills students were learning in school (e.g., learning to analyze media content critically and learning to formulate and present coherent arguments using factual evidence). And while this particular engagement was not planned or anticipated, it is also the case that, as a whole, Lobo Middle School is engaged in a number of initiatives explicitly designed to bridge gaps between the educational perspectives of parents and teachers. For example, as described previously, the student-led conferences, family curriculum nights and expositions of student learning, and Professional Learning Community parent grade-level meetings all serve this purpose. Also, in some cases, the parental and professional worlds are deliberately blurred through the volunteering of parents at the school as tutors, instructional aides, and at times substitute teachers.

Interested in stepping up efforts to engage Mexican immigrant parents in the academic life of the school, in his first year, Senor Castañon described plans to train his parent leaders on how to examine classroom instruction more critically. Interestingly, although Senor Castañon never did follow through on this plan at Lobo Middle School, he did begin to conduct what he called "advocacy workshops" for parents from *other* schools in the city. Specifically, he taught Mexican parents what to look for when observing classroom instruction and what to ask teachers and principals in their schools when they had concerns about what they were seeing. When I asked him why he had not given similar workshops at Lobo Middle School, he responded that, although it probably sounded "ridiculous," he felt like it was less of a concern at Lobo Middle School because the level of instruction was so high. As he had indicated previously, he often felt that it was difficult, even for him, to find substantive suggestions for improvement for some of the teachers.

At the same time, he indicated that he had not given up on the idea of engaging Mexican immigrant parents in additional learning about the school's instructional work and began to formulate new plan for how to start "literature circles" with parents. Here, parents would read and analyze books in the same way students were expected to do as a way to get parents to participate in the curriculum and, ultimately, gain a stronger ability to analyze and critique the instruction going on in the classroom.

Then you invite them into the classroom and say, "OK, what do you see? How is your kid engaging or not engaging? How are other kids engaging or not engaging? How is the teacher engaging them or not engaging them?" Because I feel like at Lobo Middle School, the quality of teaching

is generally pretty high, and there are places where it can be improved, but it would be hard for them to see that without some sense of the pedagogy being used.

Similarly, both Senor Castañon and two other members of the staff talked about a plan to engage Mexican parent leaders in a series of "expeditions" extended courses of study in a style similar to those that students did in class. The idea here was that it would not only help parents better understand the type of pedagogy experienced by their children, but it would serve as a vehicle for parents to learn more about issues pertinent to them. Presumably, this would also help parents make connections between classroom content and their own lives (and how making these connections were part of the purpose of the school's curriculum).

Inherent in all of the plans and efforts to engage Mexican parents more meaningfully in the curricular and instructional life of the school is the premise that parents are the ones who are responsible for doing most of the learning. In one respect, this would seem logical. If the primary intention is to engage parents more deeply in the school's core teaching and learning work, it seems natural that, for the most part, the professional educators would take on more of a teaching role and the parents would take on more of a learning role. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that there were a number of ways that teachers could potentially gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge and perspectives of *parents* and what it is that they had to offer in the education of their children.

In some cases, this might pertain to the cultural and historical knowledge that Mexican parents have about their families. This becomes particularly significant given the fact that, of the 36 full-time classroom teachers at Lobo Middle School, only twelve were Latino, only one was African-American, and one was Native Indian; the remaining twenty-two were white. Ultimately, given the high percentage of Latinos in the school, the Latino teachers were the only ones who were not teaching predominantly across cultures. However, interestingly enough, in my interviews, it was precisely the two Latino teachers who were the most openly conscientious about their own need to have deeper cultural understandings of the children and their families; here, one emphasized the fact that, despite having a Mexican heritage, she had had very different life experiences than her students; the other emphasized the importance of having not only bilingual teachers at the school, but teachers who had a deep understanding of the experiences of rural Mexican immigrants. Thus, when taken to these levels of specificity, it could easily be said that *all* teachers at the school are teaching across some types of critical boundaries (including race, culture, language, and class) which influence their ability to engage students in meaningful ways. The point here is that, in all of these cases, the ultimate authority on these issues is the children and families themselves and there are numerous ways in which teachers could learn from parent expertise.

In his study, "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching," Luis Moll examines the ways in which teacher perceptions and relationships with families can change when teachers gain new understandings about the various forms of expertise that parents have. Specifically, Moll et al. (1992) documented a project conducted by classroom teachers and university researchers in Tucson, Arizona who used home visits to learn more about

the cultural and intellectual knowledge of low-income Mexican families attending local schools. The purpose of this work was to provide a way for classroom teachers to gain information about the cultures, histories, and home lives of their students in ways that would not only help to emphasize the rich background knowledge that their students brought to school everyday, but inform the creation of lessons that were relevant and built upon the experiences of those students. One of the results of this work was that participating teachers gained new respect for students' parents and the types of expertise they passed on to their children. This expertise or "funds of knowledge" as Moll (1992) calls it, included business, medical and household management skills, as well as the moral, religious, and cultural knowledge parents used in raising their children.

A concrete example of this phenomenon—a sudden shift in the balance of expertise, so to speak, was described by one teacher at Lobo Middle School. In general, one of the most significant gaps between the experiences of Mexican immigrant parents and teachers at Lobo Middle School which goes beyond differences of race, culture, and language, is the fact that, at the time of my interviews, only one teacher at the school actually had children of her own. In this context, one teacher explained to me that, having recently revealed her pregnancy, she was beginning to sense a deep transformation in her relationship with her students' parents.

And now the parents keep coming up to me and they're like, "Now you're going to understand. Now you're going to be coming to *us* for advice." And it's really interesting because I'm just feeling like, "Wow, this is really going to change the dynamic between us," because so far I've always been the absolute authority. And that is just something that I think

about all the time now. You know, how am I going to think differently about education, about these kids? Because sometimes I feel like I'm really critical of the parents and how they deal with their kids, and I'm really thinking about how that's going to be different when I have a kid, and how they're starting to see *me* as someone who has so much to learn.

In this case, the roles of "teacher" and "learner" were reversed when the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher—the same one who had to explain the purpose and merit of her class's project on the Iraq war—was now put in a place where parents felt emboldened to give her advice and where she no longer felt like she was the "authority."

For this teacher, this transformation came naturally and unwittingly. For most other teachers, however, no such developments aided them in making connections to parents. Thus, when a couple of teachers talked about their struggles in engaging parents, I asked whether they had had opportunities to learn strategies for doing so. In each of these cases, the teachers said that they had not and indicated that, while it was generally understood that parent involvement was important in the school, they did not receive any particular orientation as to *how* to involve parents in the academic life of their students, or even how to establish strong relationships with parents more generally. Overall, it seemed that, while all teachers were engaged in extensive professional development based on the school's model of teacher inquiry, the focus of their work seemed exclusively directed toward different aspects of instruction. In that sense, teachers were not involved in "expeditions" or courses of study related to the work of parent engagement and, from what I was able to discern, no such plans for such work were underway.

Thus, despite the relatively high levels of parent engagement at Lobo Middle School and the often powerful ways many Mexican immigrant parents were involved in the school and in their children's education, there seemed to be plenty of room for deeper forms of engagement between teachers and parents. On the one hand, there were additional ways that Lobo Middle School staff could help Mexican parents develop their understanding of the content of student learning (e.g., by training them to analyze classroom instruction, developing parent "expeditions," or by simply enhancing existing practices such as student exhibitions during family nights and student-led conferences where some of this exposure to the curriculum is already transmitted). On the other hand, there were also a number of things faculty could do to build their own capacity to engage parents (e.g., by learning new strategies for involving parents in students' academic work— particularly in the middle school grades, and by learning to tap into the "funds of knowledge" that Mexican families bring to the school and transmit to their children at home).

As the school continues its work, however, it is clear that a number of difficult choices will have to be made about where to best direct its efforts. These choices are already constantly being made by both parents and faculty as they decide what types of parent involvement is going to have the most important impact on the learning and welfare of students. For example, Senor Castañon made choices during the school's second nine weeks about whether or not to spend time training Lobo Middle School parents in how to analyze classroom instruction. At the same time, Mexican immigrant parent leaders on the school Instructional Leadership Team ended up spending the bulk of their time on important— though non-academic— initiatives such as fundraising and politically mobilizing themselves against the budget cuts to their school and the threat of



a state takeover. In this case, even Senora Martinez, who spearheaded many of these efforts, lamented that all the political organizing work had probably distracted from the critical relationship-building work between parents and teachers within the school. In this regard, Lobo Middle School is not unlike any other school which struggles with a limited amount of resources<sup>o</sup> in terms of money, people, and time<sup>o</sup> which must be dedicated in the most productive ways possible. It is thus in the final chapter that I will identify some of the key lessons that Lobo MS teaches us about family engagement and, in doing so, provide some guidance for how it is that schools and school systems can best focus their efforts when engaging parents to promote high-quality teaching and learning.

### Conclusions

The story of Lobo Middle School teaches us a number of things about the purpose and power of family engagement in urban schools. First, it reveals a number of effective school-based practices for engaging Mexican immigrant parents in the work of teaching and learning. In Chapter 4, I documented a number of these practices, highlighting both the student-led conferences and family curriculum nights<sup>o</sup> both because of their prevalence as well as their quality. While some of these practices are not altogether unique, in many cases, they have been developed to levels quite beyond what most urban schools have been able to achieve. Just as important as the practices themselves, however, is the strong foundation of relational trust that is embedded in the work carried out by both students and adults within the school community. While trust and relationships are constantly being negotiated in communities and organizations of all sorts, part of what was so striking about Lobo Middle School was the degree to which Mexican parents trusted school staff, school staff trusted parents, and students trusted both. From what I observed, this has contributed

to the creation of a school culture in which both children and adults feel much invested in working hard, collaborating with one another, and pursuing ambitious goals.

The second main lesson that emerges from the story of Lobo Middle School is one that did not become evident to me until I had gotten a thorough sense of both the quality of instruction that occurs at the school and the amount of time and effort spent by the staff in order to make this level of instruction possible. In many ways, Lobo Middle School represents a best-case scenario in terms of an urban public school. It enjoys many of the key conditions that both research literature and common sense indicate are critical for effective instruction: the school is a good size, has a strong administration, a skilled and dedicated staff, and sufficient autonomy and flexibility to adopt innovative practices while maintaining infrastructural support from the district. And yet, while it is true that Lobo Middle School has achieved some impressive academic results in a very short time (as evidenced by standardized test scores, examples of student work, and the testimony of the students themselves), no one at the school would say that all students are currently "proficient" at appropriate levels.

## CHAPTER 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, the lesson here is that good (even *exceptionally* good) instruction alone is not sufficient to get all students to perform at high academic levels. It does not, of course, necessarily follow from the above statement that it is parent involvement that is missing from the equation; however, it does put more burden on this question: if quality instruction is not enough, what else is needed? My own conclusion is that parent involvement can indeed play a key part in this solution. In order to explore how this could occur, I will return to the initial question which sparked this study: *how do Mexican immigrant families engage with their children, school, and community for the purpose of raising student achievement?*

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to explore what we mean by "raising achievement." Many urban districts have made improvements and raised achievement—some of them fairly significant—with varying degrees of parental involvement. One can certainly argue that current efforts in districts such as Houston, Long Beach, Boston, and Sacramento have shown considerable promise and that it will simply require more time until the necessary improvements are made (according to the federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation, "more time" means until 2014 by which all students are to reach levels of academic "proficiency" as defined by each state's accountability system). Since none of these urban districts have come close to achieving the ambitious goal of 100% proficiency, however, a lingering and desperately important question remains which is whether or not urban schools and districts are currently on the right track—and simply need more time to achieve these goals—or if there are certain key ingredients that are missing from their work.

In my first interview with Senor Castañon, I pushed him to articulate his own theory of why parent involvement was so important to urban education. Playing “devil’s advocate,” I brought up a number of urban school districts that had made notable gains with little parent involvement as counter-evidence to the notion that parent involvement was required in order to see real growth.<sup>17</sup> His response was the following:

I would argue that you can walk into a dysfunctional school, and just by being a mean principal that makes kids go to class, you are going to see growth. Then, by being a mean principal who actually fires and evaluates teachers, you’re going to see growth. And by being a principal who actually talks to kids, and actually motivates them to take the tests seriously, you’re going to see growth. Providing breakfast in the morning before the test, you’re going to see growth. Creating incentives for perfect attendance, you’ll see growth. I mean you’ll see incremental growth for every little thing that you do that is above what is just obnoxiously bad, and then you’ll hit the ceiling. And when you hit that ceiling is when you’re going to say, “Well, we’ve done everything and these forty kids still aren’t performing.” And the danger of any of those schools is that they look at averages.

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<sup>17</sup> Two examples of these are Sacramento Unified School District and the Boston Public Schools. Both of these districts have been among the five semi-finalists for the Broad Foundation’s prize for the highest-performing urban districts in the country. In my interviews with urban superintendents leading up to this study, it was the superintendent of Sacramento who had said that parent involvement, while desirable, was not essential, and had not played a large part in the gains they had made. In the case of Boston, while family and community engagement is one of the district’s “Six Essentials” of school improvement, the scope and quality of parent involvement has generally remained quite low.

When you say “leave no kid behind,” and you have left forty or fifty behind, but you brought everybody else along, what happened to those forty or fifty kids? Well, those were the kids who are in foster care, or their parents are doing whatever, or they’re the ones whose environment at home will always overwhelm the environment in school. And so, those kids will be lost. And so, if you have a theory, if your theory really is leave no kid behind, you’re going to hit a glass ceiling. It really depends on how you define “it.” If “it” means hitting the fiftieth percentile in the scores as a district average, I think *that’s* doable without parent support.

As Senor Castañon points out, it is precisely the “it” which must be more clearly defined. For many schools and school districts across the country, “it” chiefly consists of raising overall achievement and closing the learning gaps for all students as measured by standardized tests of achievement. To date, only one urban district that I am aware of has essentially closed the achievement gap among different racial groups, Brazosport Independent School District, which is in Texas where the levels of proficiency are lower than in many states in the country.<sup>18</sup> And, even in such exceptional cases, it must be emphasized that these state-mandated exams test fairly narrow sets of basic skills (typically in English and math) and measure only a limited slice of the total learning that we would wish for our students. Most urban districts at least tacitly acknowledge that their goals for student learning go beyond standardized test scores and some, in their mission statements, actually make fairly lofty pronouncements about the type of learning they expect of their students. For example, one major urban district seeks to provide “a

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<sup>18</sup> Davenport & Anderson (2002) document the case of Brazosport Independent School District and show how, over the course of the 1990s, all racial groups within the district reached close to 100% proficiency on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

quality education that espouses a philosophy of critical thinking and equips our graduates with the skills to be productive citizens. Another goes further, seeking to promote intellectual growth, creativity, self-discipline, cultural and linguistic sensitivity, democratic responsibility, economic competence, and physical and mental health. Whether or not these or any other urban districts are seriously working towards these ends, it seems clear that many of these more holistic types of goals are quite desirable and, by some means or another, should be attained.

Thus, even as schools take on a primary responsibility for closing learning gaps between different student populations, getting all students to meet levels of proficiency on standardized tests of basic skill, and promoting students' social and moral development, they must also learn to effectively shift part of the burden of this work to the shoulders of others. In the parlance of the literature on systemic school reform, there is simply not enough professional "capacity" in the country's urban public schools to attend to the needs of all students in effective ways. There are not enough highly skilled teachers or principals, not enough money, and not enough hours in the day in order to do what it would take to ensure that no child would be "left behind" in terms of their academic learning, and certainly not enough to ensure that "to put it in Lobo Middle School terms" all students will take charge of their learning, persevere, help others, and be kind, reflective, and responsible for themselves, family, and community.

The question is thus not *if* parents should be involved in helping to attain these goals, but *how*. As we begin thinking more earnestly about how to shift more of the responsibility for this work on families, it is critical that we do so in strategic and thoughtful ways. It is not enough to blindly hand over responsibility to parents and

community members and expect them to take over. This has been tried already. In Chicago, for example, the site of the most dramatic shift of responsibility over to parents and community members, the results of this reform have been very mixed. In some cases, stronger schools and improved achievement has resulted, but in other cases, self-destructive inner-politics and lackluster academic programs have been the result (Malen, 1999, Yanguas & Rollow, 1996). Similarly mixed outcomes have resulted from experiments in "community schools" where parents and community members have exercised influence as partners or leaders in the school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In more extreme ways, handing over "responsibility" to parents has simply meant blaming them for the low achievement of their students and arguing that there is little to nothing that teachers and other professional educators can do to counter-balance presumed disadvantages attributed to class, race, culture, and language.

Thus, in order to provide some guidance on how this can be done, I will use some of the lessons learned from both Lobo Middle School and other cases documented in the existing literature on parent involvement to provide the foundation of a working theory for how it is that parents can contribute to the work of teaching and learning—both on large and small scales.

### **Implications for Theory**

One of the major shortcomings of the existing parent involvement literature is that, while many studies have examined the impact of specific types of involvement, few have attempted to compare their relative effects. Typically, researchers simply concluded that effective parent involvement programs combine various types of involvement which

fit together, as one scholar has put it, like "spokes in a wheel" (Moore, 1992).<sup>19</sup> While this seems true, this finding does little to help either professional educators or parents target their limited resources in ways that will yield maximum results. To date, the clearest statement on this issue comes from Henderson & Mapp (2002) recent review of parent involvement literature in which they conclude that "parent and community involvement linked to student learning has greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement." They also indicate that, to be effective, this involvement should "be focused on improving achievement and be designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills" (p.38). While this is a helpful start, practitioners would benefit from even greater specificity regarding *which* types of involvement will have a maximum impact on student learning as well as indications of exactly *how* this learning will occur.

Thus, in order to help bring greater clarity in respect to the relative effects of different types of parent involvement, I draw four main conclusions as the basis of a working theory for how parents can play a role in improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Ultimately, the point here is to help provide some guidance for schools and school systems who are interested in using parent engagement as a powerful tool to enhance teaching and learning for all students.

The first conclusion is that, *through political mobilization, parents can pressure school districts into making significant institutional changes within school systems;*

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<sup>19</sup> Here, citing Henderson (1987) and Gordon (1979), Moore (1992) states that "those attempting to improve schools do not have to pick and choose among various types of involvement, but rather to orchestrate a number of them effectively" (p.141-2). Henderson & Berla (1994) make a similar statement when they indicate that the different types of involvement have a "synergistic effect, each multiplying the influence of the others" (p.16). It is only very recently that researchers—such as Henderson & Mapp (2002)—have begun to draw out specific types of involvement as having particular relevance for student learning.



*however, these changes are mediated by so many intervening factors that the resulting effects on the quality of teaching and learning students experience may vary widely from case to case.* In this Southwestern state, for example, parent pressure on the school district resulted in the creation of additional supports for all students including extended learning programs. In one sense, this is the clearest example of the type of parent involvement that I set out to explore: involvement that has a significant impact on whole schools and school systems rather than simply on individual students. What is important to bear in mind about this type of involvement, however, is that institutional changes do not *necessarily* have a real impact on the quality of teaching and learning that students experience. I chose to study Lobo Middle School precisely because it seemed to be the most promising venue in the city for examining how parents could influence teaching and learning. One key factor here was the presence of many Mexican immigrant parents who, as active members of the school parent group and mothers of Lobo Middle School students, ensured that the principles of parent leadership and involvement that characterized the larger citywide mobilizing efforts were manifest within the school. At the same time, Senor Castañon, as a strong instructional leader who valued parent involvement, was able to assemble a skilled staff who could deliver on much of the educational promise of the larger reform efforts. Thus, the mobilizing efforts of Mexican parents helped make the creation of an exceptional school like Lobo Middle School possible.

Ultimately, in order to understand if and how the types of parent and community action described by Gold et al. (2002) and others are contributing to the quality of teaching and learning students are receiving, and to understand what specific factors or

conditions make these contributions possible, it is necessary to look more closely at specific teaching and learning practices occurring in more of those schools— not just in this city, but in other cities throughout the country. In this sense, further research in this area would be helpful to grasp the full potential political mobilizing efforts can have.

The second conclusion I draw from my study is that Mexican immigrant *parents can influence the quality of teaching that occurs in schools—though typically only in limited ways—by encouraging and supporting the work of teachers they trust, and by applying pressure on teachers they do not.* On the one hand, when parents have high level of trust in teachers, they can help reduce the sense of vulnerability that teachers feel when attempting new or challenging instructional practices. This notion is supported by Bryk & Schneiderø (2002) analysis of relational trust in schools as well as by the testimony of parents and teachers in my own study. At Lobo Middle School, both parents and teachers repeatedly confirmed that parents had high levels of trust in teachers; more importantly, however, this trust resulted in teachersøability to take important risks in their teaching that ultimately enhanced student learning. Examples of this include parental permission for teachers to take the entire 6<sup>th</sup> grade on a weeklong trip to New York/DC, and parentsøultimate approval of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacherø rather intense and controversial study of the war in Iraq. In both of these cases, parental approval had to be negotiated, but almost certainly would have been denied had there not been a strong foundation of parental trust at the school.

On the other hand, it is also the case that when parents are particularly dissatisfied with a teacher— in relation to anything from their pedagogy to the manner in which they treat students or family members— they can take steps to hold teachers accountable for

their actions. At Lobo Middle School, there were few real concerns about the quality of teaching; however, there were some instances in which Mexican parents felt disrespected by teachers and, through face-to-face meetings with the parent organizer and assistant principal, teachers were required to give account of their actions. In more extreme cases, parents can be influential in either pressuring or helping schools to get rid of low-performing teachers. While this did not occur at Lobo Middle School, the principal through his training of parents in other schools seemed to be promoting this possibility by giving parents the necessary skills to critically analyze classroom instruction and to appropriately question teachers and school administrators around issues of teacher performance. Although it is not clear what type of training, if any, parents received to do so, according to one high school principal in another district, organized parents actually succeeded in pressuring a mediocre teacher (who happened to be the union president) to transfer out of their school merely by ensuring that at least two parents from the class sat in the back of the classroom and observed instruction every day.

Nonetheless, what seems most challenging for Mexican parents is to actually help teachers improve the quality of their instruction. Even in cases where parents are able to pressure a poor or mediocre teacher to leave their school, it does not ensure that subsequent teaching will be better. The challenge here, of course, has to do with the fact that teaching is an extremely complex and technical enterprise which is not easy to influence without considerable expertise. Certainly, in the vast majority of cases, one would not expect parents to be able to coach teachers or give them reliable advice about how to develop their craft. While it is true that parents can learn specific skills or techniques for helping teachers in the classroom (e.g., working with small groups or

individual students, serving as guest speakers, or helping with classroom management), the actual instructional benefits generated by these types of involvement will vary widely. This is why I say that parents can have *limited* influence in this area. Nonetheless, future research that examines schools in which Mexican parents are particularly involved in classrooms (or where parents routinely provide teachers with valuable information that informs their instruction in meaningful ways) might shed greater light on the potential benefits of parent involvement on the quality of teaching. Saying this, it occurs to me that parents are the ultimate teachers from birth on even to adulthood. Parents know their children better in certain ways than anyone so it makes me wonder if there are ways that we as educators and especially K-12 teachers could be taught to more effectively learn from parents specifically over time about how their children learn best and what motivates their children in their learning.

My third conclusion regarding the relationship between parent involvement and teaching and learning, is that *parents can influence the quality of student learning by reinforcing student accountability for their learning both at school and at home; also, with increasingly sophisticated understanding of the school's goals and strategies for student learning, parents can elevate the school community's shared expectations for what students should be able to know and do.* On one level, parents can influence student learning simply by holding children accountable for meeting some very basic school and classroom expectations (e.g., regular attendance, punctuality, and the completion of homework). At Lobo Middle School, teachers repeatedly indicated that their visibly close connections with parents—often manifested in face-to-face interactions witnessed by students—made students more keenly aware that they would be unable to avoid repercussions for poor work

or poor behavior. Even more interesting at Lobo Middle School, however, was the fact that, in emerging ways, Mexican parents had begun to take on responsibility for children other than their own. For example, Senor Castañon and others described how Mexican parents had grown increasingly comfortable about disciplining other people's children at school. Also, Sra. Martinez described the case of a troubled 6<sup>th</sup> grader for whom the larger school community became a type of "surrogate mother." And although Sra. Martinez lamented that, by her standards, the school was "still not thinking as a community," by the end of the school's first semester, these and other examples indicated that the quality of adult relationships (parent-teacher, parent-parent, teacher-teacher) had begun to have visible effects on students' learning and well-being.

My fourth conclusion to my study includes the interaction between parents and educators.

Presumably, as these adult interactions become more sophisticated in relation to the content of student learning, there is also greater potential for student learning to become more sophisticated as well. For example, as parent-teacher conversations go beyond the question of whether or not a child has actually completed his homework and develop into more nuanced discussions about the *quality* of the thinking that the child has demonstrated in his homework, parents' and teachers' mutually understood expectations for student learning effectively become elevated. In other words, a student becomes positioned to feel accountable to *both* parents and teachers, not only for walking quietly through the halls, for example, but for being able to cite credible evidence to substantiate his view about the war in Iraq. At Lobo Middle School, I observed clear evidence that these more sophisticated interactions around student learning were being generated

through a variety of structured activities such as student-led conferences and family nights. Part of what was so powerful about these activities was that, in all instances, children were present as active participants with parents and teachers.

While I was not privy to parent-child interactions outside of school, these school-based activities also can contribute to parents' capacity to reinforce or enrich specific knowledge and skills at home. Some of the most vivid examples of how this can occur were described in Chapter 4. Here, a sixth grade teacher convened a small group of parents and had them brainstorm ways in which they could help promote students' reading and writing skills at home and during winter vacation. In another example, a seventh grade teacher explained to a mother that "visualization" was a key reading strategy that students were being taught in class; subsequently, he had the student model the use of this strategy for the parent, and, at the same time, essentially modeled a way in which the parent could prompt the student to practice the strategy at home. This latter example is particularly compelling in that the teacher 1) focused on a very specific skill that was being taught in class, and 2) actually modeled both the skill and a strategy for how to elicit it for the mother. Particularly at the sixth grade level, parents described having used these teacher-taught strategies to help reinforce their children's learning at home and, in some cases, teachers reported having observed positive results from this home-based support.

To summarize, the above four conclusions indicate that, while various forms of parent involvement can benefit student learning, some types of involvement seem to have more reliable benefits than others. Specifically, while political pressure brought upon school districts by Mexican parents can result in tangible institutional changes,

these changes are mediated by so many intervening factors that the resulting effects on the quality of teaching and learning students experience may vary widely from case to case. The potential for Mexican parents to contribute to student learning by influencing teaching students receive is slightly better in the sense that the act of teaching is much more directly linked to learning than are the larger structural conditions that typically result from political action. Here, while I found little evidence that Mexican parents could enhance teachers' capacity to deliver high-quality instruction, I found real potential for parents to be able to hold teachers accountable for particularly low levels of performance. Thus, in the end, the most promising roles that parents can play in enhancing the educational experiences of students seem to be in relation to activities that promote student learning most directly. More specifically, for parents and educators interested in promoting family engagement as a means of enhancing student learning, my final conclusion is that *schools will maximize the benefits of parent engagement on student learning if they focus their efforts on building parents' capacity to support and hold students accountable for meeting school-based learning goals.*

### **Implications for Future Research**

To expand, test, and deepen these findings, I would recommend at least two main lines of inquiry for future studies. First, there is a need for research that provides fine-grained analyses of other schools where parent involvement seems to be influencing the quality of teaching and learning. Such studies could serve to 1) test the conclusions of this study, and 2) more closely examine types of parent involvement that more specifically target the quality of instruction that students receive at school (e.g., either in schools where the teaching is poor and parents have been able to hold school staff

accountable for their performance, or in schools where parents have been able to enhance teachers' capacity to provide high-quality instruction in significant ways).

Also needed are studies which further test Gold et al.'s (2002) theory of change regarding the impact that politically mobilized parents can have on the quality of education that students receive. Specifically, these studies should look deeply at multiple school sites in cities where parents pushed for specific reform (such as Oakland, Philadelphia, Austin, New York, and Chicago) in order to determine 1) to what degree these efforts actually resulted in improved teaching and learning, and 2) what the characteristics of "successful" cases were (i.e., why some mobilizing efforts resulted in real student learning and others did not).

Other critical areas of studies include avenues of parent/teacher partnership specifically around student learning; studies of different parental populations in partnership with teacher/schools (i.e. other national origins, other ethnic groups, etc.); studies about developing capacity of parents themselves specifically in relation to their developing capacity to facilitate learning in their children. One example is by creating partnerships with Mexico through IME (Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior). This partnership would allow U.S. schools and communities to learn from the existing partnerships between families and educators and bring more resources to build capacity.

### **Implications for Practice**

The above conclusions, of course, also have important implications for the ways in which schools and school systems engage Mexican parents in the work of school improvement. In particular, my final conclusion that schools and school systems should



focus their efforts on building parents' capacity to support and hold students accountable for meeting school-based learning goals should inform the work of professional educators. Since the case of Lobo Middle School provides some very specific school-based approaches for doing this, I will frame the following recommendations a bit more widely in an attempt to provide guidance for entire schools systems attempting to do this work.

First, those who work in schools and school systems must realize that serious family engagement requires significant *infrastructural support*. Just as a major literacy initiative requires dedicated funding, training, and mechanisms to ensure progress and accountability, effective parent engagement requires real resources to succeed. At Lobo Middle School, there were a number of key human resources which made the work possible. For example, in addition to Sra. Martinez's part-time organizing work which was paid by a grant, a full-time family liaison coordinated parent-related initiatives such as the creation of the school's family center, and all teachers spent a considerable amount of time—both within and outside of their job descriptions—engaging parents in the academic life of the school and their individual classrooms.

While there are many types of support that would be helpful for schools, a particularly significant resource comes in the form of school-level parent organizers. Principals— even those sincerely committed to parent engagement— typically do not have the time or often the skill to effectively engage large numbers of parents on their own, particularly in communities that require extensive outreach. As was so evident in the case of Lobo Middle School, an effective parent organizer can not only gain access to parents in ways that principals and teachers often cannot, but they can serve as a key intermediary

force within the school that helps to bridge cultures, ideas, and, in some cases, help offset some of the power imbalances between parents and school staff.

A second key component to any district effort to engage families and communities in the work of educational reform is *professional development* for school and district staff. In all “successful” cases of parent and school partnership in the research literature, there has been a strong educational leader who encouraged parental involvement. Assuming that district leadership is both competent and willing to engage parents in the work of reform, attention must be paid to promoting these sensibilities and skills amongst principals and other district leaders as well. Clearly, opening the door to parent participation—particularly in terms of decision-making and advocacy—is a political risk which many school leaders are not willing to take. For those who cannot, as one former superintendent I interviewed put it, “manage the heat,” engaging parents may seem more burdensome than helpful. For others, engaging parents may seem like a natural and attractive tool for reform (perhaps due to an ethnic or cultural match between the educational leader and the parents, certain social or political capital the leader has accumulated in the community, or a general comfort a leader may have in managing political dynamics). In either case, it is also true that very few school leaders have ever received any training or had an opportunity to explore research or effective practices related to the engagement of families and communities.

At the same time, there needs to be targeted professional development for teachers and other school staff as well. In general, teachers need opportunities to learn specific parent engagement practices that directly relate to the promotion of student

learning. At Lobo Middle School, promising practices included student-led conferences, family curriculum nights, and Professional Learning Communities grade-level meetings with parents. It is also the case, however, that even at Lobo Middle School, not all teachers felt equally capable of engaging parents in these ways. In some cases, teachers would have greatly benefited from opportunities to learn and share new practices for how to engage Mexican parents more deeply in interactions related to student learning (e.g., specific ways of structuring and conducting student-led conferences that related to particularly challenging academic material).

Finally, what will be essential for any school district attempting to do this work is ensuring that the system's *instructional goals for students are abundantly clear*. Far too often, district and school leaders do not take the time to refine their articulation of key goals and strategies they are expecting or hoping parents and community members will come to support. Particularly in large school district bureaucracies, many members within the organization remain confused themselves about how the myriad missions, goals, action plans, and strategies flowing from a district's central office relate to one another. For parents and community members, making sense of district or school-based initiatives (or even gaining access to those who could explain them) can cause great confusion and frustration. Thus, for school and district leaders to expect Mexican parents to support student learning goals in meaningful ways, educators must improve the clarity with which they communicate these goals to the public.

At the school level, teachers and administrators must be able to articulate measurable learning objectives for students and key instructional strategies used to achieve these objectives. These things should be done anyway, but the clarity and

transparency with which school staff are able to do so becomes even more important if parents are to be meaningfully engaged. Lobo Middle School provides some powerful examples of specific practices— student-led conferences, family curriculum nights, and Professional Learning Communities parent grade-level meetings— which can help parents contribute to the shared accountability and support that is necessary for all students to learn at high levels.

While all of the above recommendations require significant work, thought, and time, the rewards can be substantial. Ultimately, as I have argued in these pages, urban schools simply do not yet have the capacity to educate all students at high levels *on their own*; if they did, schools all over the country would be boasting 100% proficiency rates on state mandated exams, and the majority of our students would, in the words of one district mission statement, routinely demonstrate “creativity, self-discipline, cultural and linguistic sensitivity, democratic responsibility, economic competence, and physical and mental health.” Can schools actually achieve these things? “With an army of parents” supporting them, they may have a fighting chance.



**APPENDICES**

- A. Interview Guide 1 (Parent Participants)**
- B. Consent to Participate in Research Form**
- C. Participant Observation Form**
- D. Focus Group Guide**

APPENDIX A ENGLISH/SPANISH VERSION OF INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Interview Guide 1 – Parent Participants**

I. Introduction ó Initial Interview

[Spoken to participants] I am interested in how parents who have emigrated from Mexico support and engage in their children’s learning. Do you mind if I tape this meeting? It helps me to take a few notes as we go along óis that okay? [Turn on audio recorder, if permission given]

You can tell me as much as you want, you don’t have to answer every question. This information will be kept confidential and in no way connected to your name.

A. Background information ó parent

I’d like to start by asking some basic questions about you. It’s pretty typical of studies like this.

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender \_\_\_\_\_
3. Country of origin \_\_\_\_\_
4. What was the last grade you completed in Mexico \_\_\_\_\_  
(country of origin)?

B. Background information ó child

I’d like to learn more about your children with you here in the U.S. [Ask for the following information in question form]:

- |                   |       |         |          |                               |                          |
|-------------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5.No. of children | 6.Age | 7.Grade | 8.School | 9.Receives free/reduced lunch | 10.Relationship to child |
|-------------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|

C. Main questions

The rest of the questions are about your experiences in life and about your thoughts about learning, both in school and out of school.

11. You were born in Mexico (country of origin) and you are now a parent living in the US. That's quite a change. Please tell me about coming to the U.S. Why did you decide to do this?

Probes:

- a. What's pleasant about your life here?
- b. What's difficult?
- c. What do your kids think about your new life here?

12. What's a typical day like for you and your family here?

13. What was a typical day like for you and your family in Mexico before you left?

14. Can you tell me what you remember about going to school in your country? Going to high school? To college?

Probes:

- a. Can you remember any time when you really felt you were learning a lot?
- b. Can you remember any time outside of school when you really felt you were learning a lot? For example, at home? With your grandparents or with older family members?

15. Did your parents support your learning?

Probe:

- a. Did they support you when you were doing your homework? If yes, how?

16. Were your parents involved in the school you attended? If yes, how were they involved?

Probe:

- a. Tell about the impact your parents involvement or non-involvement made to your education?
- b. In high school? If yes, how?
- c. In college? If yes, how?

17. How much of the English and Spanish language do you hear during a typical day?

Probe:



- a. Do you use English at home? Does anyone?
- b. Do you use English at work? Does anyone?

18. In what ways is being a parent in the U.S. difficult if one does not speak English?

Probe:

- a. How difficult is it to engage in your child's school if you don't speak English?
- b. How do you communicate with your child's teacher?

19. What do you do to be sure your child(ren) are getting a good education?

20. What does a typical school day look like for your child?

21. What does a good education mean for your child's future?

## APPENDIX B CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM

The University of New Mexico Main Campus IRB

Consent to Participate in Research and the

Albuquerque Public Schools Letter of Support

### Consent for Participation in Interview Research

You are being asked to take part in a research study of ENGAGEMENT OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN SCHOOLS and the EDUCATIONAL IMPACT FOR SCHOOL REFORM. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What the study is about:** The purpose of this study is to learn how immigrant Mexican families make meaning of their engagement in education. You must be a parent or legal guardian of a student attending a public middle school to take part in this study.

**What I will ask you to do:** If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your experiences with education, the time you spend participating in your child's school and the types of activities you participate in, including at home or throughout the school community, about your experiences in life and about your thoughts about learning, both in school and out of school. The interview will take about 30-45 minutes to complete. Notes will be written during the interview. With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview.

**Risks and benefits:** I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

**Compensation:** You will receive a school t-shirt as a token of appreciation for your time and willingness to participate in this research study.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I make public I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. If I audio-record the interview, I will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of its audio-recording.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to

skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the school or community. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is James Luján. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact James Luján at [lujan\\_j@aps.edu](mailto:lujan_j@aps.edu) or at 505-877-3770. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 505-272-1129 or access their website at <http://hsc.unm.edu/som/research/HRRC/>

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview audio-recorded.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of Investigator obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least one year beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on September 17, 2012.

**APPENDIX C PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION FORM**

**What to observe during “Participant Observations” Form                      Observation**

# \_\_\_\_\_

**Category: Family Engagement**

**Researcher Field Notes:**

Scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest score)

Setting: HOME – SCHOOL – COMMUNITY

Level of Participation: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

Level of Engagement: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

Learning Outcomes/Obstacles:

|                     |                          |                |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Frustrated          | <input type="checkbox"/> | Angry          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Relaxed             | <input type="checkbox"/> | More confident | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sad                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | Surprised      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Better about myself | <input type="checkbox"/> | Strange        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Good                | <input type="checkbox"/> | Proud          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Funny               | <input type="checkbox"/> | Anxious        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Under pressure      | <input type="checkbox"/> | Supported      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Self critical       | <input type="checkbox"/> | Listened to    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Liked               | <input type="checkbox"/> | Respected      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Given time          | <input type="checkbox"/> | Put down       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Comfortable/safe    | <input type="checkbox"/> | Understood     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Talked at           | <input type="checkbox"/> | Confused       | <input type="checkbox"/> |

|         |                          |         |                          |
|---------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------------|
| Distant | <input type="checkbox"/> | Ignored | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fed up  | <input type="checkbox"/> | Noticed | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**APPENDIX D FOCUS GROUP GUIDE**

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

ID Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Initial Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Follow-Up

Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Introduction:

This focus group is being conducted to gain an understanding between home and school relationships and how these relationships (if any) contribute towards student achievement, including making meaning of the engagement. Previously, you received and signed a consent form indicating that you agree to participate in the study. As we agreed, this focus group will be audio-recorded and it will take about an hour. Do you have any questions at this point?

I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences related to your child's education and school. They are open-ended questions, with no right or wrong answers.

Questions:

1. What is the commitment of the school to engage with parents in meaningful ways to enhance learning?
2. What are the important resources that families can offer to the learning process?

3. Are mechanisms in place to facilitate shared decision-making and communication between school and home?
4. What strategies are working to effectively engage parents?
5. What needs to be improved?
6. What action can be taken and by whom?
7. How does parental involvement in a child's education matter to their success/achievement?

Thank you for participating in this focus group.



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- É LULAC: <http://www.lulac.org> (League of United Latin American Citizens)
- É MALDEF Mexican American Legal Defense & Education Fund
- É Nation Council of La Raza: <http://www.nclr.org>
- É Pew Hispanic Center: <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/pomr012604nr.cfm>

É The 2002 National Education Service study is highlighted in "Strengthening Parent Involvement: A Toolkit," a Publication by the Colorado Department of Education available online @ [www.cde.state.co.us/cdeunified/download/pi\\_toolkit.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeunified/download/pi_toolkit.pdf).