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Valuing Education: How Culture Influences the Participation of Mexican Immigrant Mothers in the Formal Education of Their Children in the United States

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

by

Gregory Sean O'Brien
March 2010

Dissertation Committee:
    Dr. Natalie Becker, Co-Chairperson
    Dr. Robert Ream, Co-Chairperson
    Dr. Douglas Mitchell

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The Dissertation of Gregory Sean O’Brien is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

This dissertation is dedicated to Gloria Adelina Montúfar de O’Brien …

My beloved wife, esteemed colleague, and best friend.

I could never have done this without you.

Te amo con todo mi corazón.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Valuing Education: How Culture Influences the Participation of Mexican Immigrant Mothers in the Formal Education of Their Children in the United States

by

Gregory Sean O'Brien

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Education
University of California, Riverside, March 2010
Dr. Natalie Becker, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Robert Ream, Co-Chairperson

U.S. Latino parents are often characterized by educators as uninvolved in school and the formal education of their children because they do not value education. While research indicates otherwise, stereotypes still exist among many educators that one reason Latinos do poorly in school is because they do not care. Masked behind stereotypes is the significant variation in levels of parent involvement in education *among* U.S. Latinos. The literature does not address why parents with similar socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds respond to schools in such distinct ways. This ethnographic case study addresses variation in the involvement of Mexican immigrant mothers by focusing on how some use their cultured capacities to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States. The implications for policy and practice include a greater understanding of why some Mexican immigrant parents routinely participate in the school affairs of their children while others with similar characteristics and backgrounds do not; and how institutions, like schools, may have the means to impact the strategies of action chosen by parents through the use of widely disseminated semiotic codes. This study also finds that culture's role in the participation of Mexican immigrant parents could not fully be accounted for in Epstein's (1995, 2001) Six Types of Involvement for Parents. Socializing was identified as a seventh type of involvement that may actually serve as a catalyst for involvement in the other six types and a means for strengthening home-school connections. In addition, a significant finding not seen elsewhere in the literature was an overwhelming amount of evidence that the majority of Mexican immigrant mothers in this study believed that schools were better in Mexico than the U.S.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

If there is a single proposition that almost all parents, educators, politicians and the public-at-large can agree upon, it might be that parent involvement in a child's schooling benefits the child, the parents, and the school. For more than forty years, research has been conducted to document the benefits of parent involvement and find ways to increase it (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 2001). At the national level, the significance of parent involvement in school is such that schools under the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001 are now charged with not only increasing student achievement to state proficiency standards but with increasing parent involvement as well (Henderson, 2002; Fege & Smith, 2002). Yet, as I will demonstrate in this study, what parental involvement is ideologically and practically is so circumscribed by culture, SES, and the institution of the school that researchers are often talking at cross purposes or in ways that result in miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Overview of the Problem

Gaps in student achievement between students who are categorized for purposes of statistical analyses as White or Asian and students who are categorized as Black, Latino[1], and/or poor are one of the most persistent challenges facing educators (Ream,

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[1] The term "Latino," as used in this paper and most publications, refers to individuals whose heritage is linked to Spanish-speaking individuals from Latin America, the Caribbean, and, occasionally, Spain. The term "Hispanic" is also commonly used. For K-12 public schools, three out of every four limited English proficient (LEP) students speak Spanish and are classified as Hispanic (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 1996). The similarities between the various Latino ethnic groups are often limited to language. Latinos in the U.S. are a heterogeneous mix of individuals from Central and South America, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other nations. The vast majority, 66.1 percent, are of Mexican descent (Therrien & Ramirez, 2001).

Espinoza, & Ryan, 2009; NCES, 2006; Ream, 2005; Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Boethel, 2003). I have chosen to use “gaps,” in the plural, to highlight the fact “that what is often characterized as a single gap between White students and minority students is more accurately portrayed as multiple gaps between and within ethnoracial[2] and social class groups” (Ream et al., p. 657). Many consider the benefits of parent involvement to be an important element toward the NCLB goal of eliminating achievement gaps (Henderson & Mapp, 2003; Boethel, 2003; Epstein 2001; Chavkin, 1993). A Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public’s attitude towards schools found that 97% of those surveyed believed that parent involvement was a very important or somewhat important factor contributing to the achievement gap (Rose & Gallup, 2003). Nowhere are these factors more salient than when connected to the achievement of Latinos and their relationship to the public school. Latinos are not only the fastest growing minority group in the United States (already constituting the largest ethnoracial group in California public schools) but also one of the lowest academically achieving groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Ream, Espinoza, & Ryan, 2009).

The need to develop and implement parent involvement policies at the federal, state, and local levels is often cited as a crucial step for beginning the process of increasing parent involvement (Boethel, 2003; Carey, Lewis, & Farris, 1998; Epstein, 1991). NCLB articulates expectations that range from how parents will participate at school in affairs ranging from parent-teacher conferences to decision-making committees, and at home with everything from homework to television monitoring. Districts and schools are mandated to develop jointly with parents both district and site parent involvement policies to further guide local practice (Henderson, 2002; Fege & Smith, 2002). The impact of policy on practice, however, is not as direct as policymakers might desire (McLaughlin, 1992), especially when schools are comprised of a complex mix of students, parents, and educators, each reflecting unique socioeconomic, ethnoracial, and cultural identities (de Carvalho, 2001; Placier et al., 2000).

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[2] I have chosen to use the term “ethnoracial” to reference the often times ambiguous terms of race and ethnicity. Most current scholars choose to avoid the term “race’ which is a social construction, not a biological category, and has been used historically to legitimize discrimination and prejudice (Morris, 2003). Ethnicity is seen as a less rigid category that is used to describe membership in a non-dominant group and may include such things as culture, language, worldview, music, foods, and so on. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget is responsible for defining the categories on race and ethnicity that are used to collect federal data. As of 2003, there are a minimum of five categories for race (American Indian/ Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and White). Ethnicity is either Latino/Hispanic or Not Latino/Hispanic. Therefore Latinos can be of any race (KewalRamani, et al., 2007). Similarly, minorities are often defined as all ethnoracial groups that are not White, non-Latinos.

In general, the literature shows that U.S. school culture holds expectations of parents and families that are often quite different than those within Latino culture (Valdés, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Rivero, 2006). Latino parents are shown to trust schools more than mainstream families, often deferring to teachers in matters concerning the formal education of their children while focusing their attention on the moral upbringing of their children (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud & Dornbusch, 1993; Valdés, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). Yet, U.S. Latino parents are often characterized by educators as uninvolved in school and the formal education of their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Carey et al., 1998). While research indicates otherwise, stereotypes still exist among many educators that Latinos do poorly in school because they do not care (Henderson & Mapp, 2003; Boethel, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Quiocho & Daud, 2006; Chavkin & Williams, 1993). However, even within the immigrant Latino community there are some parents who are more involved than others and in ways that are more acceptable by school institutional standards (Ritter et al., 1993; Valdés, 1996). The literature does not address why parents with similar socioeconomic, ethnoracial, and cultural backgrounds respond to schools in such distinct ways.

Ann Swidler's (1986, 2001) theoretical framework suggests a way of thinking about variations in the way culture is used by a relatively homogenous group. Her "Culture as Repertoire" model posits that culture is like a tool box that contains any number of cultural capacities, or skills, that an individual can use at any time to create strategies of action. An individual is able to successfully live within a community utilizing some, but certainly not all, of the culture that has been acquired throughout life. During settled times or periods of social stability, individuals become more or less comfortable using certain tools and are not required to think too much about it in everyday life. During times of upheaval, individuals may be forced to learn new cultural capacities or adapt familiar capacities in order to choose new lines of action. Swidler contends that while one's practice is often determined by one's inner beliefs and capacities, individuals are able to adapt or change their behaviors based on external influences such as semiotic codes ("systems of meaning that define what our actions will mean to others" p. 179), contexts, and institutions. As Swidler (2001) demonstrates, in-depth interviews can provide a mechanism for learning about the complexities involved when determining a strategy of action. This conceptual framework may shed light on the range of responses to U.S. schooling by Mexican immigrant parents.

This topic is important because while NCLB makes parent involvement one of the four fundamental pillars[3] for eliminating achievement gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), the literature shows that many Latino parents are not involved in their children’s education in ways that are sanctioned by the law and accepted by educators (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003; Valdés, 1996). Even when they are involved in ways stipulated under NCLB, Latinos participate less than other ethnoracial groups (Ritter et al., 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The literature describes a number of barriers that exist between schools and immigrant Latino parents (Boethel, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004), but offers only limited insight into how culture influences participation in the formal education of their children in the U.S. Their lack of participation at schools sites is sending a message, but do educators understand what that message means? This lack of understanding does little to suggest ways that schools can help the parents of those students who are most at risk in our schools.

The Current Study

While the literature does show many positive correlations between parent involvement and increased student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), much of the success has been achieved with relatively small groups of students whose parents are already involved or have demonstrated a willingness to be involved (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). These studies do little to inform us of the much greater number of parents with whom the schools have little or no contact.

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[3] The four pillars are: accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Focus: Mexican Immigrant Mothers

I chose to focus on Mexican immigrants because they are not only the nation’s largest and fastest growing immigrant group, but they are also a subgroup of one of the lowest academically achieving ethnoracial groups in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Mexican immigrant parents often do not answer surveys, many do not attend parent trainings, and, for the most part, have not made their voices heard. I chose to focus on mothers because they are typically the ones who bear the responsibility for child rearing, especially as it relates to schooling. The development of effective policies and strategies for reaching out to parents who in the terms of mainstream policy and practice appear to be passive and/or disengaged requires a systematic cultural analysis of these parents to better understand how they construct and employ strategies of action related to their children’s education.

Research Design

I designed an interpretive research study that took the form of an ethnographic case study of Mexican immigrant parents, primarily mothers, at a single school site. This case study addresses variations in parent involvement using Ann Swidler’s (2001) theoretical framework to examine how some Mexican immigrant mothers use their cultural repertoire to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States. Data were collected through participant observation, document analysis, informal interviews with adults at the school, formal interviews with a sample of Spanish speaking Mexican immigrant mothers who were selected for the purposes of group-level comparisons, as well as formal and informal interviews with school personnel. This study compares those parents who are involved in ways that are encouraged by schools and policies like NCLB with those parents who are frequently described as both “uninvolved” in their children’s school and “hard to reach.”

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Based on my reading of the literature, I hypothesized that:

1) *Mexican immigrant mothers do draw upon a common set of cultural resources, including parental behaviors stipulated by NCLB which are not outside the realm of cultural resources available to Mexican immigrant mothers. Variations noted between “involved” and “uninvolved” mothers are the result of the ways that they choose to use the common cultural resources available to them.*
2) *The value placed on education by even a relatively homogenous group of Mexican immigrants will manifest itself in different behaviors based on the complex ways that people use the common cultural resources that are available to them.*
3) *Swidler’s conceptual framework of “culture as repertoire” will shed light on how and why some Mexican immigrant mothers decide to get involved in ways that are sanctioned by U.S. educational policy and others do not.*

These hypotheses were examined via the following research questions:

(1) Why do some Mexican immigrant mothers routinely participate in the school affairs of their children in ways prescribed by educators while others with similar characteristics and backgrounds do not?

(2) What does valuing education mean to Mexican immigrant mothers?

(3) Does Swidler's conceptual framework of "culture as repertoire" help us to better understand how immigrant Mexican mothers construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States?

Contributions to Theory, Policy, and Practice

This study contributes to the growing body of research which finds that all families, including Latinos, value education by expanding upon the meaning of parental involvement for those who are often described as uninvolved or uncaring (Boethel, 2003; Chavkin, 1993; Ritter et al., 1993). It increases our understanding of why Latino immigrant parents decide to become involved or remain uninvolved in their children's formal education as prescribed by schools (Valdés, 1996; Rivero, 2006; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001). This study also adds to the knowledge base upon which policymakers can draw as they consider policy options in their attempts to increase parent involvement among Mexican immigrants.

Summary

While almost all parents, educators, politicians and the public-at-large seem to agree that parent involvement in a child's formal education is beneficial, the variations noted in levels of parent involvement in education among U.S. Latinos may diminish these potential benefits. The literature does not address why parents with similar socioeconomic, ethnoracial, and cultural backgrounds respond to schools in such distinct ways. This ethnographic case study addresses variations in Mexican immigrant parent involvement by focusing on how Mexican immigrant mothers who participated in my study use their “cultural repertoire” to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States.

Organization of the Study

This chapter provides an overview of both the need for and the difficulties of increasing parent involvement, especially in light of the demands of NCLB. The current study is discussed and the cultural dynamics of group-level differences in parent involvement are briefly introduced.

Chapter two reviews the relevant literature on parent involvement and the theoretical framework used in this study. After a brief history of the origins of the notion of parent involvement, there is an overview of the definitions used to describe the involvement of parents in their children’s education. This is followed by the research showing the effects of parent involvement on student achievement and the efforts of schools to incorporate it into their programs. A theory of “culture as repertoire” is presented as a tool of analysis for understanding how Mexican immigrant parents construct strategies of action in regards to their involvement at school.

Chapter three describes the research design and methodology used in this study. An interpretive research design is utilized that takes the form of an ethnographic case study of Mexican immigrant mothers at a single school site. The methods for data collection, a description of the setting, and the means of data analysis are provided. I describe how reflexivity was used to account for both my impact on the setting as well as my perception of what was observed in order to engage in systematic inquiry that tests the validity of what has been described and the accuracy of the analysis.

I begin my analysis of the data in chapter four by introducing the reader to the Mexican immigrant mothers who came to make up the core group of this study. I will describe both the similarities and differences in their upbringing as well as begin to describe the diverse ways that they have chosen to respond to schooling in the U.S. I describe how I divided these mothers into two groups, those connected to the school and those detached from the school, by applying a standard sociocultural definition of parent involvement as exemplified by scholars such as Epstein (1985, 2001).

In chapter five, I provide an interpretive/cultural analysis of the key types of patterned behaviors that these mothers exhibited towards the education of their children and the institution formally charged with their schooling. Based on Swidler (2001), I will describe these behaviors as “strategies of actions” which are the culturally shaped patterns of behavior that individuals routinely utilize when confronted with life’s challenges.

In chapter six, I analyze some of the cultured capacities or “tools” that the Mexican immigrant parents had at their disposal in order to construct their strategies of action. I separate these capacities into four categories: (1) Thoughts and Feelings, (2) Skills, Styles, and Habits, (3) Group Membership, and (4) Worldview. Each category allows me to highlight both the similarities and the differences that were evident between mothers who were connected and those who were detached.

Chapter seven explores the impact that external constraints on culture have on the strategies of action that individuals utilize. I discuss how the decision of Mexican immigrant mothers to carry out a particular line of action is influenced not only by their own inner culture, but by other external or societal processes such as codes, contexts, and institutions that are able to systematize cultural meanings and mediate their influence on actions.

In chapter eight, I categorize the patterns of parent involvement practices or strategies of action and the cultured capacities that were observed and talked about by Mexican immigrant parents and school personnel. I will begin with Epstein’s (1995, 2001) Six Types of Involvement for Parents, adding a seventh category, which I will call “Socializing,” to account for data that did not seem to fit well in the other six categories. Special attention will be given to the similarities and differences between connected and detached mothers.

In chapter nine, I present a summary of the findings regarding the involvement of Mexican immigrant mothers and their use of cultural repertoires to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States. I provide implications of these findings for educational policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review

Parent involvement in children’s education is not a new concept even if, as the literature demonstrates, its meaning today is not always clear. Parents are children’s first educators. For much of human history, parents and family members were their only educators. During the Middle Ages, formal education in the West was under the direction of the church and only available to a limited number of individuals (Berger, 1991). As education became more widespread in the early nineteenth century, U.S. teachers distributed pamphlets to parents which provided a teacher’s perspective on how to raise better children. By the end of the century, teachers were encouraging the formation of parent organizations (McCaleb, 1994).

Most women at that time, however, did not work outside the home and few children attended secondary school. According to the census of 1900, less than 21% of women overall and only 6% of married women were in the workforce (Bureau of the Census, 1907). The secondary school attendance rate of youth, ages 14 to 17, in 1890 was only about 6.7 percent (Kliebard, 1982). Today, a majority of women in the United States work outside the home and nearly all of the youth in the above age group attend secondary school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

In addition to these shifts in behavior, the twentieth century also saw schooling become increasingly important in the political realm. During the first half of the twentieth century, many educators of the Progressive Era believed that schooling was best left to educational professionals and should be divorced from political issues (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001; Cibulka, 2001). Stone et al. give two reasons for this stance. First, there was a widespread negative view of politics held by many Americans. Education was regarded as an institution for the common good which needed to be protected and insulated from the corrupt, self-serving interests of politics and politicians. Second, educators believed that their expertise included the proper organization and suitable techniques that would provide adequate solutions to the challenges facing public education. However, even though Progressives viewed politics as a "direct threat" when it attempted to take "power out of the hands of the experts," they also saw it as a "necessary evil" when educators needed it to "get the proper policies and programs into place" (Stone et al., p. 3).

For some, the apolitical nature of schooling championed during the progressive era was in fact only an ideal. The White, Protestant, middle class occupied a privileged position in both society and education, and they were anything but apolitical, particularly with regards to local school board decision making (Cibulka, 2001). However, the notion that public education could be kept separate from politics was done away with when it was unmistakably elevated to the national stage by a wave of federal activism that began in the 1950s with national security concerns after the Russian launch of Sputnik and the call for equal rights after the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* (Cibulka). Nationalizing influences continued in the 1960s with national interest groups advancing feminism, student activism, and the civil rights movement (Cibulka; Morison, 1978). One outcome of these movements was to motivate federal and state governments to develop and fund programs to increase parent involvement (McLaughlin, 1992).

The 1964 Civil Rights movement prompted research into large amounts of data on schools and student achievement by race, family background, socio-economic status and parent education level. The seminal report by Coleman et al. (1966), *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, asserts that the variations in average levels of achievement between schools are mostly accounted for by factors outside of school, including family background (Gamoran & Long, 2006; Ream, Espinoza, & Ryan, 2009). And while the findings of this report have since been challenged (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Greenwald, Hedges & Laine, 1996), it is once again being argued that the school system cannot effectively educate children without the participation of their parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

More recently, attempts by the federal government to articulate parental rights and responsibilities have been incorporated into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 which was signed into law on January 8, 2002. NCLB is the new name for the latest revisions made to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and was heralded by President G.W. Bush as the cornerstone of his administration’s educational policy (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In addition to NCLB’s emphasis on academic standards and accountability, as primarily measured through standardized test scores, parental involvement in children’s schooling is listed as one of its chief pillars. The current emphasis on parent involvement reflects policymakers’ and educators’ understanding that parents are key stakeholders in their children’s education (U.S.

Department of Education, 2003). Parent involvement is viewed as a means for providing more accountability to parents, strengthening ties between schools and families, and utilizing the resources that already exist within families to benefit children (McGarth & Kuriloff, 1999; Henderson, 2002; Fege & Smith, 2002). We have yet to see what changes the Obama administration will bring to NCLB and education at the federal level.

Definition of Parent Involvement

In a four year study of Latino immigrant parents' involvement in their children's schooling, the results indicate that stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers) as well as the researchers themselves did not share a common definition of parent involvement (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). The ambiguity relating to the definition of parent involvement is also seen in the literature (McCarthey, 2000; Mattingly et al., 2002). This failure to label the specific parent involvement behaviors on the part of many researchers has contributed to the confusion and, occasionally, strong emotion that is often associated with this topic (Valdés, 1996).

In the broadest sense, parent involvement is anything that parents do with regards to their children (Valdés, 1996; de Carvalho, 2001). This would include informal parental involvement activities at home such as help with homework and providing for the child's physical needs as well as more formal kinds of parental involvement in institutions. In the narrowest sense, parent involvement, according to educational policy, is associated with those behaviors that can be linked to increased student achievement at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Student achievement often refers first and foremost to standardized tests scores on state exams with additional success measured by student grades, attendance, graduation rates, and student behavior (office referrals, suspension, and expulsion rates) (Henderson, 2002; Fege & Smith, 2002). Policies directed toward schools, like NCLB, are not just interested in any kind of parent involvement, but the specific types of involvement that have been linked with improved academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2003).

Joyce Epstein's (1995, 2001) categories for describing parent involvement are perhaps the most widespread and most closely aligned to the requirements set forth in NCLB. They include both the formal involvement at institutions as well as informal types of involvement at home. Epstein identifies six practices that were adopted by the National PTA in 1997 as the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. The six standards are (1) communicating, (2) parenting, (3) student learning, (4) volunteering, (5) school decision making and advocacy, and (6) collaborating with the community (National PTA, 2000). All six are meant to be incorporated together based on the needs of the local school and its community. She encourages schools to avoid measuring participation as "bodies in the building" (Epstein, 1995, p. 707) and to redefine parent involvement so that more families can become meaningfully involved. Mattingly, et al. (2002) note that the implications of Epstein's classifications are that "increasing parent involvement requires changing the behavior of both parents and school personnel" (p.551) even though the majority of programs they studied aimed at increasing parent involvement only focused on changing the behavior of the parents. Epstein's six types of involvement were used as the starting point to analyze the involvement of the Mexican immigrant mothers I interviewed for this study with an eye to both parent and school personnel behaviors.

Effects of Parent Involvement on Student Achievement

A wealth of research shows that parental involvement makes a difference in student achievement, and that there are things that can be done to increase it (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Epstein, 2001). For example, high levels of parent involvement are consistently one of the characteristics of high performing schools and result in such things as higher attendance rates, better student behavior, and increased teacher efficacy (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein 2001).

Additionally, positive outcomes for children are influenced not only by ***what*** parents do but ***how*** they do it. It seems that students do better in school and in life when parenting styles are authoritative (warm and involved, yet firm and consistent) rather than authoritarian (rigid, controlling, and punitive) regardless of socioeconomic status (SES) or ethnoracial membership (Steinberg, 2001; Pizzolato & Slatton, 2007). Steinberg (1996) also finds that even typical forms of parent involvement in the home such as checking homework and encouraging students to do better in school were not as effective for increasing academic achievement unless they were combined with the types of involvement that brought the parent into the school, communicating the message that school is important to the parent. He notes that school personnel are aware of parent involvement at the school and may be more prone to listen to their concerns and provide assistance.

While research shows that parents with lower incomes and less education are typically less involved than those with higher incomes and more education (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Lareau, 2000), other studies find that when these parents do get involved, the behavior can mediate the effects that low parent educational levels have on academic achievement (Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Epstein (1992) arrives at the same conclusion and adds that "parents' practices of involvement compensate for less education or less income to benefit children" (p. 1141). The possibility of increasing student achievement, especially as measured by standardized test scores, makes parent involvement an important topic for educators who must also contend with the accountability aspect of NCLB.

Despite findings that parent involvement has positive effects on student achievement regardless of ethnoracial background, socioeconomic status, and parent education, the types of parent involvement that have been shown to be the most effective for increasing student achievement are those engaged in by white, middle class parents (Lareau, 2000; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Horvat et al., 2003). Yet even here, it is not always clear what kinds of academic gains result from which types of parent involvement with schools and under what circumstances (Mattingly et al., 2002; Epstein, 2001, Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Even less is known about the effects of behaviors of those parents who have been traditionally labeled "hard to reach" or "uninvolved" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Davies, 1993). Many of the studies on parent involvement fail to pursue the meanings and beliefs reflected in the actions of the parents themselves. Parent perspectives are often inferred through the voice of a third party (e.g., students, teachers, administrators) (Carey et al., 1998). Even when parents are consulted, responses are usually limited to those who are already participating, often ignoring the views of parents who do not (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Some argue that rather than providing a voice to those who have traditionally been underserved by schools, institutionally sponsored parent involvement strategies actually cater to the strengths of white, middle-class parents who already have a greater familiarity with the system (McGarth & Kuriloff, 1999; Horvat et al., 2003). Furthermore, involved parents are often most concerned about obtaining advantages for their own children, not helping all students to succeed whereby creating additional competition for their own children (Lareau, 2000). The result is that traditional efforts at increasing parent involvement can actually create impediments to involvement for socio-economically disadvantaged and minority parents (McGarth & Kuriloff, 1999).

While expressing confidence in the overall findings which point to the benefits of family, school, and community connections in their synthesis of the most recent research and literature reviews, Henderson and Mapp (2002) and Mattingly et al. (2002) point out that there are several limitations to the current research and corresponding conclusions. A large number of studies base their findings on survey data from large databases. The data collection design cannot confirm the relationship between reported and actual behavior. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine directionality (i.e., does parent involvement increase achievement or does higher student achievement—or in, some cases, lower student achievement—increase parent involvement?). And while survey data is able to provide some information on a large number of topics, “they don’t tell us why parents, students, or teachers responded the way they did” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 19).

Participant observation, triangulated with interviews and analysis of artifacts, can be used to systematically probe the how and why of sociocultural behaviors. Interviews, in particular, allow researchers to ask study participants follow-up questions so they can elaborate as to “why” they responded the way they did to a particular question. Understanding the why is the challenge facing researchers. Additionally, the use of interviews and observations may be the most effective way of collecting data from parents whose literacy skills may be limited (Brantlinger, 1985). A qualitative study, utilizing data from both observations and interviews, can be particularly useful when dealing with questions involving complex relationships that exist between parents and schools and the factors that influence them.

Schools and Parent Involvement

While parent groups like the PTA and others have at times taken the lead in changing and improving the family-school relationship, schools and districts are, by law, the ones primarily responsible for making, implementing, and enforcing policies. Schools are compelled to enact certain formal parent involvement mechanisms, like report cards, School Site Council, and open house; as well as to provide additional parent involvement activities, such as parenting classes that are designed to improve informal parent involvement activities at home, in order to increase student achievement (Henderson, 2002; Fege & Smith, 2002). While state and federal policies certainly allow for parents to initiate involvement activities at the school, Epstein (1986) contends that teachers and principals are the ones who control and manage formal parental involvement activities at the school. Schools are also the ones responsible for developing a climate in which parents feel comfortable participating. Comer (1994) states that “schools—more than parents—are in a position to create the conditions needed to overcome difficult relationship barriers” (p. 36).

Yet how prepared are schools to work with parents? Hanson, Henry, & Hough (1992) indicate that much of the communications sent out from schools are unintelligible to most parents due to the fact that they rely heavily upon jargon and are often not translated into the primary language of the parents. Epstein (1986) finds that only a minority of teachers go beyond what is traditionally expected of them in forming home-school partnerships such as report cards, parent-teacher conferences and open house.

Nevertheless, when teachers do engage in certain behaviors like increasing communication, home visits, parent-teacher contracts, and homework that requires parent involvement, parents are more likely to get involved (Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). This fits the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) theoretical model which posits that parent involvement is influenced by both general and specific invitations from the school. Furthermore, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2002) find that advanced pre-service teachers have more positive beliefs about parents and feel better prepared to involve parents than their peers with less coursework experience. These findings seem to support the need for improvements to teacher training programs if increasing parent involvement is the goal.

Becker (2005) finds that an often overlooked aspect of family-school relationships is the front office of the school. She describes how school secretaries are important organizational players that have a significant impact on the interactions that take place between schools and families. Building on Zucker (1991), Becker demonstrates how the principal is able to determine not only official school policy by means of formal power structures, but also how the principal's personality and leadership style is able to create a distinct office climate at the school through ongoing interactions with individuals in the front office on a daily basis. She speculates that not only secretaries, but other non-credentialed staff, and even volunteers, at the site must have similar effects. Becker posits that significant changes in family-school relationships require a school-level response rather than a classroom-level response.

Then again, not everyone is completely committed to the notion of parent involvement with school. Some parents reject the efforts of schools to increase parent involvement at the school or home. There are parents who clearly state that they prefer to be left alone by the school and reject the partnership model altogether (de Carvalho, 2001). Further complicating the issue is the fact that schools as organizations are extraordinarily ambivalent about parental involvement (Becker, 2005). Some educators are apprehensive about promoting parent involvement, fearing the possibility of encountering unreasonable parents (Jones, 2001).

If, then, the parent-school relationship is more complex than originally envisioned (Becker, 2005; Lightfoot, 1978; Epstein, 2001), does the research reveal any patterns that result in greater or less cooperation between the home and school? Lareau and Horvat

(1999) use a qualitative research design to investigate and discuss how race, class, and cultural capital work together to influence the family-school relationship. Cultural capital is the theoretical notion proposed by Bourdieu (1977) that certain cultural experiences in the home of the dominant class such as language, attitudes and dispositions, behaviors, knowledge of music, art and literature allow some students to adjust more readily to the school experience thus providing them with an advantage in school and society.

Set in a racially diverse school, they find that the predominantly white educators "enthusiastically welcomed parent involvement" as long as it was "positive and supportive" as well as trusting in "their judgments and assessments" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, pp. 42, 43). The suspicion and hostility demonstrated by some of the black parents who felt that black children at the school were subjected to unequal and less favorable treatment compared to white children was not considered by the school to be legitimate. The authors conclude that this school reaction affords a privileged position to white parents who are either willing to work within the "institutional framework" of the school or are able to work outside this framework but in socially legitimate ways due to their status and power relationship with the school (p. 44).

The lack of parent involvement in African American children's schooling is often attributed to feelings of intimidation by school personnel, negative personal school experiences, failure to recognize its importance, and inconvenient meeting times (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Sentiments that are echoed by other ethnoracial and minority groups (Valdés, 1996; Boethel, 2003; Carreon et al., 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Site parent involvement policies are supposed to contain clauses that address these issues and articulate the need to reach out to all families, recognizing the diversity that exists within the community.

Yet, not all black parents encounter difficulties when dealing with the school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2003). Some African-American parents feel that their children are being treated equally. These parents, from a range of social-class positions, support the principal and the school, and some even hold other black parents responsible for difficulties they encounter because they are not involved enough.

While not ignoring or denying the interconnectedness of race and class, Lareau (2003) argues that class, in fact, has more of an impact on home-school interactions than does race. Regardless of race, middle-class families have noticeable parallels when it comes to parental concerns, organized activities, interaction with relatives, and school interventions than they do with working-class and poor families (Horvat et al., 2003). While, overall, these studies find that middle-class parents are more adept at customizing their child’s education successfully than working class parents, they point out that there is a difference between possessing cultural capital and activating it successfully. Swidler (2001) might view this as an example of the difference between possessing cultural capacities and using them to create strategies of action.

Whether due to background, temperament, or other factors, many black parents are able to develop positive interactions with the educators even if they had a distrust of the school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau, 2003). Lareau and Horvat contend that the life of a student consists of many small and large experiences that either aid or hinder a student in his or her life trajectory. Both class and race do play a part, but they do not absolutely determine a child's outcome. Privilege cannot be passed along automatically any more than limitations. What does seem to be important, however, is the ability of the parents to successfully work within the school's structure for appropriate interaction.

In a follow-up study, Horvat et. al (2003) look to social capital theory to explain social-class differences in parent-school relationships. Ream (2005) broadly defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources embedded in social networks that may be converted, *via* social exchange, into other manifestations of capital, including physical/economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), human capital (Coleman, 1988) and healthy civic participation and community cohesion (Putnam, 2000)" (pp. 11, 12). Horvat et al. find that parental networks vary by social class. They describe how efforts to resolve problematic school situations through social networking between parents of school peers are primarily a function of the middle-class. In contrast, working-class families tend to look to their relatives, or kin, when encountering a problem at school. The result is a continuation of social class advantage rather than its alteration.

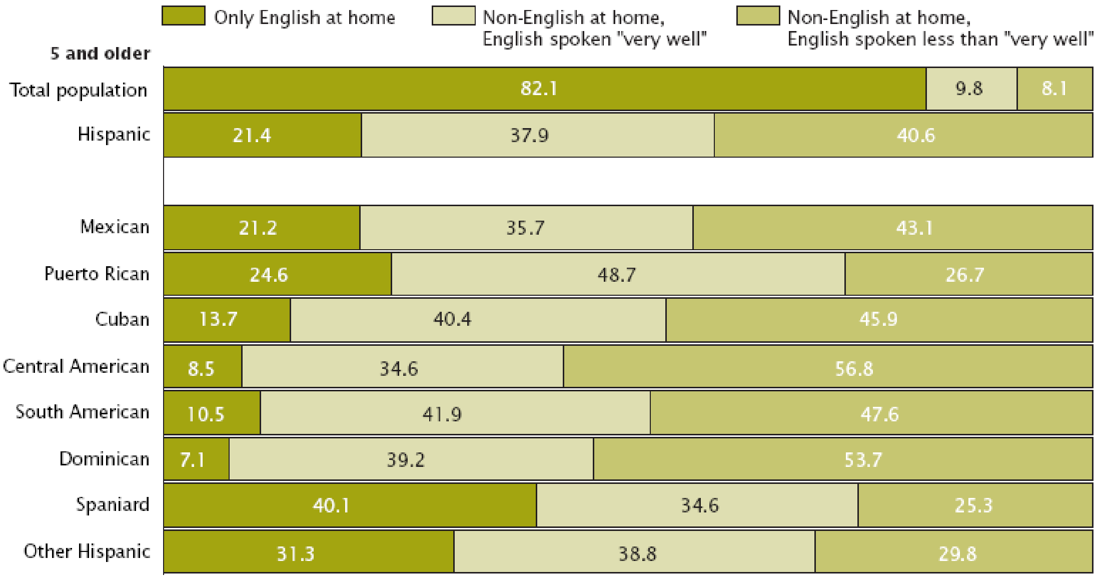
Although they do not elaborate, Lareau and Horvat (1999) mention that some poor black parents avoided difficulties by choosing to remain uninvolved in the school. This study offers insight and further elaboration into why some Latino immigrant parents choose to participate in formal parent involvement activities and others do not. It also seeks to shed light on what informal parent involvement takes place at home regardless of the involvement at school.

Latinos and Achievement Gaps

In the early 1990s, the first Bush administration feared that America was facing a "workforce crisis" (The White House Initiative, 1992). New workers were needed to take over for an aging workforce. The Latino population was viewed by many in the Administration as a solution to this problem since their population was increasing at five times the national average and they were characterized as having "a strong work ethic, strong family ties and commitment to community" (The White House Initiative, p. 2; Valadez, 1992). The Administration was concerned, however, that Latinos lacked the necessary skills to join the American workforce since their educational attainment was the lowest of any minority in the nation with a 45% high school dropout rate ("The White House initiative"; Valadez, 1992). As a result, President Bush signed Executive Order 12729: Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, to aid in the "development" of this segment of the population. The order established a presidential advisory commission to aid the Secretary of Education in improving educational opportunities for Latinos. The federal government took the stance that the challenges facing the poor and minorities could not be ignored without hurting the quality of life for everyone (Valadez, 1992). A primary assumption of the commission was the need to view education as a family and community concern, capitalizing on the strong commitment to both within the Latino community.

These actions mirror concerns over what has now become a vast literature that demonstrates an almost "lawful" persistence to the gap between the average academic achievement of poor children of color and that of more affluent white children (Epps, 1992; Rothstein, 2001; Boethel, 2003). And while other minorities have had to face a long history of discrimination and unequal treatment, many Latinos have had to overcome the additional difficulty of learning a second language. Nearly 41 percent of the U.S. Latino population speaks English less than “very well,” and 78.5 percent speak a non-English language at home (see Figure 2.1). When only looking at Latino students, 25 percent speak mostly Spanish at home; an additional 17 percent speak both Spanish and English equally (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). In all, 71 percent of Latinos ages 5 to 17 speak at least some Spanish at home, and of these, 23 percent have difficulty speaking English (Llagas & Snyder). Of relevance to the issue of Latino immigrant parent involvement, 92 percent of Latinos who speak mainly Spanish in the home have a mother who was born outside the U.S.

Figure 2.1. Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability: 2000



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 4; and *We the people: Hispanics in the United States Census 2000 Special Reports*. Issued December 2004.

Latinos also have a higher dropout rate than either White or Black students (see Figure 2.2). The status dropout rate (the percent of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent) for all Latinos is 22.8 percent compared with 7.2 percent for Whites and 11.6 percent for Blacks (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The dropout rate is almost twice as high for Latinos when compared to other groups with a similar socioeconomic status (Slavin & Calderón, 2001). For those 25 years of age and older, 27.3 percent have less than a ninth grade education, and only 57 percent have graduated from high school (Therrien & Ramirez, 2001). The nativity/immigrant status, however, seems to play a big role in this relatively high dropout rate. The disaggregate dropout rate for Latino immigrants is 38.1 percent compared with 13.2 percent for those born in the U.S.

Figure 2.2. Percentage of 16- to 24- Year-Olds Who Were Status Dropout by Nativity and Race/Ethnicity: 2005

Race/Ethnicity and Subgroup	Number	Total	Native	Foreign-born
Total	34,602,000	10.5	8.6	25.2
White	21,163,000	7.2	7.2	6.3
Black	4,786,000	11.6	11.8	8.5
Asian	1,423,000	3.5	2.9	4.0
Hispanic	6,190,000	22.8	13.2	38.1
Mexican	4,150,000	25.5	13.8	41.9
Central American	469,000	32.6	9.9	43.7
South American	267,000	9.1	4.8	11.8

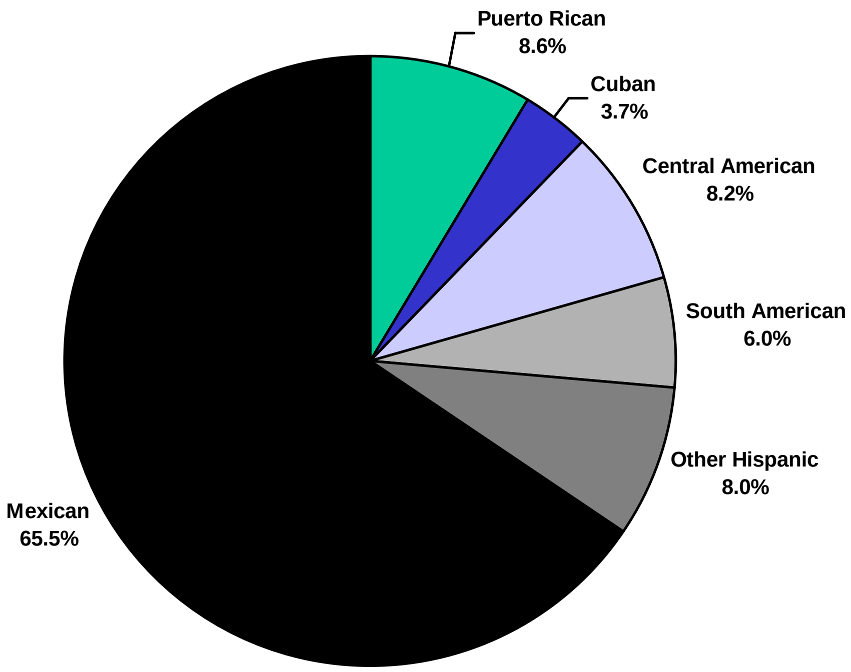
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005; and U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities*. Issued September 2007.

Latinos and Blacks have higher poverty rates than other ethnoracial groups, and they are also more likely to attend schools that are comprised of both poor students as well as schools where minorities are the majority of the student body (Rumberger, 2007;

Llagas & Snyder, 2003). As a result, the negative effects of individual poverty on academic achievement are compounded by those of school poverty. Furthermore, the rates of racial integration that had improved after *Brown v. Board of Education* are now reversing themselves (Orfield & Lee, 2007).

In addition to being the largest segment of the Latino population (see Figure 2.3), Mexican households are set apart by the fact that they have the highest percentage of households with five or more people (35.5 percent), the lowest high school graduation rate for those over 25 years of age (51.0 percent), the lowest occurrence of individuals who have attained a bachelor's degree (6.9 percent), and they are the least likely to work in managerial or professional occupations (11.9 percent) (Therrien & Ramirez, 2001).

Figure 2.3. Percentage Breakdown by Latino Sub-Population in the United States



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement 2006.

And while the status dropout rate for Mexican Americans born in the U.S. is significantly lower than for their foreign-born counterparts (13.8 percent vs. 41.9 percent), the rate is still higher than for both whites (7.2 percent) and blacks (11.8 percent) born in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Research has looked at everything from cultural and linguistic to economic and educational explanations for this situation (Rong & Preissle, 1998).

Once considered outside the influence of the school, student mobility rates are now being looked at, and studies find that non-promotional rates of student mobility are linked with an increased risk of dropping out of high school (Rumberger & Larson, 1998) as well as a disruption in the acquisition of social capital, resulting in lower academic achievement (Ream, 2005). In a study of Mexican-origin students, Ream (2003) found that when entering a school mid-year, teachers often offered a “patronizing form of social support” (p. 252), that he refers to as “counterfeit social capital,” in order to achieve peace within the classroom rather than academic success.

Many of the studies that compare Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born Mexican Americans often fail to provide specific background information about the individuals or groups being studied. This failure to clearly describe the diversity of the Mexican American population across nativity/immigrant status groups represents a gap in the research literature. This study focuses on foreign born Mexican immigrant mothers who studied in Mexico but whose children now attend school in the U.S.

The academic woes of Latinos have often been linked to the stereotypical belief that the culture does not value education (Valdés, 1996; Chavkin & Williams, 1993). In stark contrast to this belief, the research overwhelming supports the position that parents from every culture value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003), including Latino immigrants (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Valdés, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The value placed on education, however, may not be understood by those in the American education system or captured by mainstream definitions of parent involvement such as Epstein (1995, 2001). What's more, the manifestations of this concern for education may change over time the longer an immigrant is in the United States. While Latino immigrants initially are quite satisfied with the schools in their new country, some research shows that this attitude can change with time. They come to believe "that the curriculum is not challenging and that their children are studying material they already know, they view the school environment as hostile or violent, and they report that their children are taunted because of their accent or the kinds of clothes they wear" (Carreon et al., 2005, p. 470). Initial positive expectations are impacted by actual negative experiences.

The findings of much of the work that has taken place with regards to parent involvement by minorities, in general, and Latino immigrants, in particular, have been on the need for greater understanding and respect by the institution for what parents are already doing rather than the impact of parent involvement on student achievement (Valdés, 1996; Boethel, 2003; Rivero, 2006; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). These studies seek to document ways that these parents are already involved in their children's education that often go unnoticed by the institution regardless of the impact of these practices on student achievement.

Theoretical Framework

When trying to understand the differences in parent involvement practices and the gap in academic achievement between mainstream white families and socio-economically disadvantaged and minority families, culture often takes center stage. The definition of "culture" depends greatly upon the group doing the defining. The general public often views culture as little more than foods and festivals. In the field of education, the term is often broadly used by researchers to include "the culture of class, as well as of racial or ethnic identity, geographic origin, sociolinguistic background, and the like" (Boethel, 2003, p. 15). Traditionally, culture was defined by sociologists and anthropologists like Ward Goodenough (1971) as "the standards for ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and judging, which are learned by a group of people" (p. 25). It has also been described as the entire way of life of a people or everything one would need to know to become a functioning member of society (Swidler, 2001). These definitions were largely discarded after the seminal work by Clifford Geertz (1973) for a symbolic view of culture which proposes that language and behavior are symbolic forms that are imbued with meaning. The meaning of each symbol cannot be separated from the context and is socially constructed. These symbolic forms would include: "beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies" as well as "informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (Swidler, 2001, p. 12).

Studying education and schooling from a cultural perspective makes sense for several reasons. First, education and schooling is meaningful to most people. It is central to the lives of families, especially ones with school age children. Politically, it requires large amounts of tax dollars and is always near the top of concerns noted by registered voters. Second, education is considered by many to be a moral undertaking (Brann, 1979; Dillon, 2003). Cultural analysis is especially fitting for issues that involve a society's beliefs and practices of what is right and wrong. For many, gaps in academic achievement are not just an unfortunate statistic, but a moral failing of society. Ladson-Billings (2006) contends that these gaps are an "educational debt" that is owed to those who throughout this nation's history have been excluded from social benefits and opportunities. This debt is the result of the accumulation of historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral deficits on behalf of the poor and minorities. Finally, while public education is considered a common practice across the U.S., the diversity of cultural traditions that now exist within America's pluralistic society mean that a closer look at the practices and meanings of different groups may help eliminate achievement gaps that culture is so often blamed for causing (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Valdés, 1996).

Explanations for Achievement Gaps

Research is embedded within a context of underlying beliefs and theories as to the cause or causes of the problem. Studies that view parent involvement as one way of reducing the achievement gap often locate the problem within a deficit, cultural differences, power differential, or complex interaction conceptual framework or model (Boethel, 2003).

Deficit model

The deficit or cultural deprivation model attributes the lack of student achievement to characteristics of students themselves or deficiencies in the home (Garcia, Wilkinson, & Ortiz, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). After the Coleman Report (1966) was released, researchers began to focus on family conditions and home environments that failed to stimulate intellectual development and behaviors that were necessary for school success (Deutsch et al., 1967). Lewis (1966) argues that poor children are trapped in a self-perpetuating culture of poverty that inevitably results in school failure. For example, Hart and Risley (1995) find that both the number and kinds of words spoken to children varied by social class and had an impact on I.Q. By age three, the children of professionals who were exposed to not only more words, but also sentences that were more complex and positive had nearly twice the vocabulary of those children whose parents received welfare.

While most researchers now reject many of the conclusions generated by the deficit model (Valdés, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Rivero, 2006; McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001), it appears to be the basis for many intervention programs that focus on changing the home rather than the school (Boethel, 2003; Banks 1995; Starkey & Klein, 2000). Mattingly et al. (2002) note in their analysis of 41 parent involvement programs that "the majority of programs focused on changing parent behavior—especially in the areas of parenting and supporting home learning—rather than on changing teacher practices or school structures" (p. 565). In part, this theory is criticized for its failure to recognize family strengths and the positive contributions of parents from all cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). On the other hand, Steinberg (2001) argues that research on authoritative vs. authoritarian parenting styles shows that the positive results of authoritative parenting cuts across race and class and can accommodate cultural diversity. He warns against allowing “political correctness” to immobilize researches from providing “clear-cut direction that parents want and need” (p. 13).

Cultural differences model

The cultural differences, dissonance, or mismatch model attempts to recognize cultural differences between the home and the school without placing blame on the former (Sleeter & Grant, 1988; Baratz & Baratz, 1970). Both white, middle-class teachers and poor, minority students are asked to enter the world of the other and find common ground upon which to build an education (Futrell, 1999; Abi-Nadar, 1993). This theory posits that cultural differences may lead to problems at school, underachievement, and even conflict between parents and teachers, without implying that the home culture is inferior or that families do not care about education. It suggests that schools need to become more culturally sensitive while families and students need to become more knowledgeable about school expectations and practices (Sletter & Grant, 1988). Studies on Latino immigrants show that problems often arise when the expectations of parents, which are based on experiences in their country of origin, do not match those of U.S. educators (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Trueba and Gaitan, 1988; Valdés, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Power differential model

If the cultural deficit theory is at one of the spectrum, placing the blame for school failure on the family, the power differential model or “culture of power” theory (Delpit, 1995) places the blame on the school. Class, gender and racial differences create conflict between parents and the school which represents the dominant society. Researchers with this perspective analyze public education to understand how macro-level institutional factors influence schools to maintain class differences by promoting "the inclusion of some groups and the exclusion of others from the activities, experiences, and resources that contribute to academic success" (Boethel, 2003, p.16; Valdés, 1996; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Schools are seen as being responsible for the reproduction of the mainstream culture and of the power elite (Bourdieu, 1973). Those who are not a part of the mainstream culture lack the "insider" knowledge that, while usually only taught implicitly in school, is necessary for academic success as measured by mainstream educators.

In their seminal work, *Schooling in capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis (1976) offer a systematic Marxist account of the role of schooling in modern society. Schooling is presented as an institutional mechanism for reproducing the inequalities of a class system. They suggest that much of what takes place in schools is not designed to provide students with knowledge and skills, but rather they are being socialized to accept their place in society and accept inequalities as being justified, thus reproducing the status quo.

Especially for working class families and those outside the mainstream, such as Latino immigrants, schools can be seen as employing sorting mechanisms that distributes knowledge in such a way that class distinctions are reproduced.

> The role of schools is to legitimize inequality under the pretense of serving all children … students come to believe that they are in fact given an opportunity to succeed. They leave school firmly convinced that they could have done better… if

> only they had tried harder or worked more. They are then ready to accept low-paying working-class jobs, and the working class is thus reproduced." (Valdés, 1996, p. 18)

The interactions between educators and parents are complicated by the fact that there are both *formal* and *informal* structures in place that govern their relationship. On a formal level, the school, as an institution, is a power structure. The state and federal governments have given educators certain powers, such as compulsory education laws, that regulate the actions of both students and parents. The educator's role as an agent of the state can result in a much more authoritative position with regards to working-class families than those of upper class families who grant authority to educators only within the context of their professional expertise in education (Metz, 1990; Becker, 2003; Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982).

Lareau (2000) uses social class to analyze how the daily interactions between people and institutions can aid or impede the ability of parents to acquire advantages for their children. As previously noted, Lareau and Horvat (1999) find that the suspicion and hostility demonstrated by some black parents is the result of feelings that black children at the school are subjected to unequal and less favorable treatment as compared with white children. The authors conclude that the school affords a privileged position to white parents who are either willing to work within the "institutional framework" of the school or are able to work outside this framework but in socially legitimate ways due to their status and power relationship with the school (p. 44). The lack of parent involvement in

African American children’s schooling is often attributed to feelings of intimidation by school personnel (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001).

The remedy for the problem is actually quite similar to the one proposed by the deficit model. Those outside the culture of power need to be given interventions that will provide them with the skills and knowledge that the power elite possess and they do not (Nieto, 2002). Schools need to explicitly teach the rules of the culture of power and provide them with both “insider” knowledge and access to social networks that will allow them to successfully participate in mainstream culture and shift power in their favor (Delpit, 1995).

Complex interaction model

A fourth explanation for the achievement gap identified by Boethel (2003) is the complex interaction perspective. This view posits that the academic performance of minority students may be the result of complex interactions between multiple factors (e.g., school, student, family, peer group, community). Eliminating achievement gaps will mean that attention must be given to all of these factors and their interactions (Ream, 2005). Research on the resiliency of children attempts to identify the risk and protective factors, like parent involvement and positive role models, which impact their success in school and elsewhere (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). Becker (2005) cautions, however, that seemingly straightforward suggestions that parent involvement can have a positive influence on students may actually work to obscure the complexity of the relationship. Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair (1999) conclude that success or failure cannot be attributed to activities that take place solely at the home or in school. Rather it is a complex process that is dependent upon the actions of both parents and teachers, and their interactions on behalf of the students. Ream et al. (2009) also draw attention to the complex set of factors that together influence student achievement, including the family, peers, school, the community, and society.

While these theories have contributed to the literature on cultural explanations for the involvement practices of poor and minority parents by providing diverse lenses for analysis, they fail to address how parents use culture to choose strategies of action for involvement in their children's schooling (Swidler, 2001). A clearer understanding of how parents actually *use* culture is important because the literature also fails to address why some parents with similar cultural backgrounds act in ways that are accepted by schools and others do not.

Culture as Repertoire

The primary theoretical framework used to guide this study was first proposed by Swidler (1986) and later used by her in a study on the culture of love (2001) to address the way culture is actually used by people in their everyday lives. Her "culture as repertoire" model posits that culture is less like a great stream and more like a tool box. These tools are any number of "cultured capacities" or skills that an individual can use at any time to create "strategies of action." This model provides a way of understanding how contradictory views can be held at the same time and how deeply held beliefs can often be circumvented by superficial ones. It is a means for analyzing how a common culture can express itself in such diverse ways. Swindler's framework makes it clear that culture’s influence on experience is not straightforward but complex and often contradictory.

Swidler (1986, 2001) contends that an individual is able to successfully live within a community utilizing some, but certainly not all, of the culture that has been acquired throughout life. Individuals become more or less comfortable using certain tools and are not required to think too much about it in everyday life during periods of social stability in what Swidler (2001) refers to as settled times. New strategies of action may be called for and new cultural capacities may need to be learned, however, during times of social upheaval or unsettled times. Durkehiem might use the term anomie to describe the alienation and isolation that result when norms, or expectations of how people will behave, no longer function properly (Thompson, 1982). Swidler’s model might help to shed light on why some immigrant parents (living in unsettled times) may learn new cultural capacities or adapt familiar capacities in order to choose new lines of action for success in the U.S. school system. At the same time, this model may also shed light on the reasons why others immigrant parents may not see a need for new strategies of action since schooling in the U.S. looks, at least on the surface, very similar to schooling in Latin America.

Codes, Contexts, and Institutions

Swidler (2001) describes how one’s own inner culture can have a “powerful *causal* influence on action” (emphasis added) when it is united with other external or societal processes such as codes, contexts, and institutions that are able to systematize cultural meanings and mediate their influence on actions (p. 161). Culture affects action both through deeply held inner beliefs as well as powerful messages from society that can shape the meaning of actions. Swidler describes how actions can be influenced by widely disseminated codes, or “systems of meaning that define what our actions will mean to others” (p. 179), when they become part of the cultural resources available to the public. An individual’s decision to choose a course of action may be based upon how certain actions will be perceived by others rather than a deeply held belief (e.g., an individual may give certain kinds of gifts at Christmas based upon how the kind of gift or the failure to give a gift may be interpreted by others rather than on a deeply held belief in the custom). The influence of cultural codes over behavior is especially powerful in the public arena where it is more difficult to influence how one’s behavior may be defined by others.

One’s actions are also influenced by the context. “Culture’s effects are strongest when the context demands and enforces public cultural coherence” (Swidler, 2001, p. 169). For example, a national revolution can serve to unify and clarify one’s cultural beliefs and their influence on behavior. While different beliefs and behaviors were once tolerated, a revolution provides a context that magnifies the influence of culture on behavior, forcing individuals to choose sides. For some, the achievement gap between minorities and middle class white students may present just such a context. For others, the wave of immigration from Latin America may require that choices are made as to which side one supports and how one chooses to act in the face of a changing social landscape.

Swidler (2001) contends that institutions influence culture in two ways. First, many life strategies and cultured capacities for action are determined by institutional demands. Action only makes sense when one considers the limitations placed on an individual by the multiple institutions, everything from marriage to public education, or the various aspects of any one institution. Second, institutions are also able to influence behavior by creating the basis for a shared culture, not based on indoctrination, but on "the common dilemmas institutional life poses in a given society" (p. 176).

Compulsory education in a country where public education is the norm, especially for those who are economically disadvantaged, becomes the basis for a common culture. However, what happens when an immigrant attempts to utilize cultured capacities that were acquired in the native country to participate in a new institutional arena which appears similar? "The sense of cultural disjointedness one feels in moving to or through a foreign culture is primarily a sense of the misfit between one's cultural expectations and an alien set of institutions (Swidler, 2001, p. 177). Mexican immigrant families may experience a sense of "cultural disjointedness" when they attempt to use their previously successful strategies of action to navigate an educational system that, while it appears quite similar, requires a new cultured capacities in order to navigate it successfully.

Furthermore, if certain cultural norms are followed, like following the school calendar or daily start times, why is it that other norms, such as volunteering at school and attending school meetings, are not followed? Do parents only bring their children to school because of the threat of legal penalties for failure to do so? More importantly, if Swidler's proposition that codes, contexts, and institutions can mediate culture's affects on behavior is correct, could this knowledge be used to create and disseminate parent involvement policies that redefine acceptable actions by adults and change both school and parent behaviors in order to reduce achievement gaps?

Summary

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature on parent involvement and the theoretical framework used guide this study. I begin with a synopsis of the development of the field of parent involvement over time through its prominent inclusion into federal law in NCLB. The ambiguity relating to definitions of parent involvement in the literature are discussed, and, for purposes of this study, Joyce Epstein's (1995, 2001) categories for describing parent involvement are introduced to provide as a starting point for my analysis as they are perhaps the most widespread and most closely aligned to the requirements set forth in NCLB. While overall, research shows that parental involvement makes a difference in student achievement, little is known about the effects of behaviors of those parents who have been traditionally labeled "hard to reach" or "uninvolved." I argue that a qualitative study, utilizing data from both observations and interviews, can be particularly useful when dealing with questions involving complex relationships that exist between parents and schools and the factors that influence them, especially when collecting data from parents whose literacy skills may be limited.

The persistence of achievement gaps among Latinos, in general, and Mexican immigrants, in particular, as well as the enormous size of the population provided the impetus for choosing this sub-group for this study. The literature does not address why Latino immigrant parents with similar socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds display variations in their level of parent involvement. Historically, studies often locate the problem within a deficit, cultural differences, power differential, or complex interaction conceptual framework or model. The primary theoretical framework used to guide this study is the “culture as repertoire” model which posits that culture is like a tool box and the tools are any number of “culture capacities” or skills that an individual can use at any time to create “strategies of action.” This model provides a means for analyzing variations in Mexican immigrant parent involvement in the U.S.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Data Collection

Given the lack of attention in the research literature to what it means for Latinos to “value education” and the absence of explanations as to why immigrant Latino parents with similar backgrounds and demographics can respond so differently to schools in the United States, I designed an interpretive research study that utilizes Swidler’s (1986; 2001) culture as repertoire theoretical framework in order to investigate these questions. My interpretive research project took the form of an ethnographic case study of Mexican immigrant parents at a single school site. Interpretive researchers seek to discover the meanings that participants themselves hold for their actions (Erickson, 1986) while at the same time trying to understand how these meanings are shaped by the larger social context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Spindler, 1987). An interpretive methodology provides analytic tools that are suitable to examine nuances of meaning that impact action in a particular context.

The Research Design: Why an Interpretive Study?

Many parent involvement studies rely upon data produced through the observation of parents who are already involved. Similarly, studies that use survey data recognize that one weakness of their methodology stems from the fact that parents who respond to surveys are often parents who are the most involved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). While expressing confidence in the overall findings which point to the benefits of family, school, and community connections in their synthesis of the most recent research and literature reviews, Henderson and Mapp (2002) point out that a limitation of research that utilizes survey data is that it is unable to tell us *why* parents, students, or teachers responded the way they did. An interpretive study allows the researcher to ask why and to delve deeper into comments that are made and actions that are observed. Additionally, the use of interviews and observations may be the most effective way of collecting data from parents whose literacy skills may be limited (Brantlinger, 1985).

This study is not aimed at “dispelling myths” (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006), but rather, it is focused on probing more fully the finding that Latinos value education and then providing a richer description of what this means for different parents. This study provides a cultural analysis of and explanation for the strategies of action used by Latino immigrants to make decisions about their involvement in their children’s education in their new country.

A basic tenet of interpretive research is that people act sensibly given what they know about how the world works (Erickson, 1986). We know that parents from different ethnic backgrounds often act differently at school (Lareau, 2000). Yet, even individuals with similar ethnic backgrounds can exhibit different types of behavior within the same context (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Valdés, 1996; Lee & Bowen, 2006). This study investigates how it makes sense for individuals that share common cultural resources and social class to choose different actions within a seemingly similar context.

An interpretive study is ideally suited to perform this kind of investigation because the intention is to gain access to the process by which individuals choose strategies of action whose meaning has been socially constructed and makes sense to them in their context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Erickson, 1986). A case study allows the researcher to collect large amounts of data on a small number of actors in a particular context in order to fully describe the case and better understand what is taking place (Yin, 1993; Erickson, 1986). While generalizability is not the goal of interpretive research, by studying a concrete case in depth, the researcher, and later the reader of the study, will be able to make connections to other cases, shed light on universals, and separate out those details that are specific to the case at hand (Erickson, 1986). The value of an interpretive methodology that employs ethnographic methods is founded upon the existence of variations in cultural patterns and the ability of the researcher to uncover and describe those variations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

My study examines a small number of seemingly similar Mexican immigrant mothers in depth in one school context with the goal of uncovering differences within these similarities. An ethnographic study allows me to produce the rich data that are needed to understand why some parents with similar backgrounds and cultural resources choose to get involved as prescribed by parent involvement policies and school expectations while others do not. I want to know how policies that stipulate parent involvement are communicated to parents, how they are understood by these parents, and what kinds of impacts they have on their actions. I want to understand what Mexican immigrants make of the schools that their children attend, the parent involvement policies that have been designed to articulate desired parent involvement activities, and the parent involvement activities that are described within those policies. What cultural capacities do they possess as part of their cultural repertoires that they employ to create strategies of action? The focus of this study is on how parents with similar backgrounds use culture to decide on strategies of action that include or exclude parent involvement as described in terms of formal policy and school organizational practice.

Data Collection

Qualitative research emerged from the philosophical position of naturalism which posits that the social world can best be understood when studied in its natural state (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Its methods for generating knowledge are similar to the customary ways that individuals make sense of their everyday world and the researcher is the most important research tool (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Erickson, 1986). “Ethnography exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures, and the objectivity to which this process gives rise (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 9). Through the process of participant observation, analysis of available documents, and discussions with those being studied, a researcher is able to gain access to the cultural world of another, making it an object for study. The validity of an ethnographic study is enhanced by utilizing a variety of data collection methods (Page, 1991). I gathered data for this study through participant observations, interviews, focus groups, and document collection over an eight-month period of time from August 2008 through March 2009.

The Setting

Before I began any research, I secured human subjects participation agreements with UC Riverside. After I completed all of the required university paperwork, I began my search for a school that met the following criteria. I looked for an elementary school site that was predominantly Latino (at least 90%), had a high percentage of students with free and reduced lunch (at least 80%), and had a high proportion of English Language Learners (ELL) (around 50%). Information on school demographics was easily obtained over the internet through the California Department of Education website.

The reason for choosing a school with such a high percentage of Latino students that receive free and reduced lunch was to reduce the likelihood that white, middle class mothers would dominate the school setting (Lareau, 2000). Since the intent of this study is to compare how Latinos from similar backgrounds use their culture differently, I chose to use a school that minimized the number of confounding variables. Furthermore, since the majority of minorities attend schools where minorities are the majority, especially Latinos (Orfield & Lee, 2007; Llagas & Snyder, 2003), a study at a school with these characteristics is more recognizable and more meaningful to a greater number of people interested in this subgroup. A school with a high ELL population was needed to ensure that there would be a significant number of immigrants. Parents from Mexico and Latin America tend to speak a language other than English in the home, a key indicator for identifying students who are ELL when they initially register at the school.

I chose to conduct my study at Orange Elementary (pseudonym), a kindergarten through sixth grade school located in a satellite city of Los Angeles with just over 41,000 residents. More than 80% of the city’s population is Latino with 37.4% of the population having been born in Latin America. Approximately 68% of the residents are of Mexican ancestry and 74.8% of the total population speaks a language other than English at home. More than half the residents over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma. There are approximately 565 students at the school of which 94.7% are Latino and 46.2% are classified as ELL with an additional 23.9% classified as Fluent English Proficient (meaning they entered school speaking a language other than English and were either initially classified as fluent in English or were redesignated as fluent in English after meeting certain state and district criteria). The primary language of the immigrant parents at the site I selected is Spanish, and the vast majority of them are from Mexico. More that 85% receive free or reduced lunch, well above the district and state averages.

Orange Elementary was not categorized by NCLB as Program Improvement during the data collection portion of this study. However, because the school failed to meet federal accountability requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2008 and 2009, it did become a Year 1 Program Improvement school with additional requirements and sanctions by the federal government. Furthermore, the school fell nine points in their state Academic Performance Index (API) to 704 in 2008 and an additional four points to 700 in 2009 (55 points below the state average and 67 points below the district average).

In addition to the high concentration of Latino immigrants at the school, it also has a Latina principal of Mexican heritage who speaks Spanish fluently and a high concentration of Latina teachers. District personnel also confirmed that it is a school with a strong parent component even though its history of success working with the community has been somewhat mixed.

Gaining Entry

After locating a school with the desired demographics, access to the site took place in several stages. I began by first contacting the principal and explaining my study. After receiving positive feedback from her and an initial willingness to participate in the study, I then had to secure permission from the school district to conduct the study. I completed a “Request to Do Research in the District” form that asked for the purpose and parameters of the study. I received a letter of approval from the Superintendent’s Cabinet in which they requested a report back of my findings at the end of my study. Finally, I met again with the principal of Orange Elementary, providing her with a letter of intent which both describes the study and asks for approval (see sample copy in the appendix). Permission was obtained from the principal to conduct my study at her site, and she offered to help in any way possible. She seemed pleased and excited that I had chosen her site for my study. From the very beginning, it was clear that she took great pride in both her school and the school’s parent volunteers.

Participants

A key aspect of my research hinged on the characteristics of participants that I was able to secure for interviews during the study period. In particular, locating and convincing uninvolved mothers to meet with me and participate in recorded interviews was my biggest challenge. Since uninvolved parents do not attend parent trainings, do not answer surveys, and are often hard to reach, I had to work closely with school personnel to identify those mothers whom teachers describe as uninvolved or under-involved in their children’s education. I also used a snowballing technique (Hammersley & Atkinson,

1995) to discover the names of additional mothers. I worked with involved mothers to identify friends and neighbors whom they knew did not participate in school functions. I even had two uninvolved mothers come to me at the school where I work and ask to be in the study (they had heard about me from their network of friends as well as the remuneration of $20 for participating, see below).

Involved mothers were more easily identified due to the fact that their names appear on sign-in sheets at school meetings, and I saw them frequently around the school and at school meetings and events. Highly involved mothers were also readily identified by school staff. All of my initial contacts with the involved mothers took place at the school site. After meeting them, I informed them of the study, and, if they decided to participate, what their part would be. I always gave each contact a Parent Informed Consent letter (see appendix). I also asked for their name and phone number and told them that my wife or I would be contacting them after they had a chance to read the letter. Except in a few cases, most mothers had to be called multiple times in order to finally reach them. Most of the involved mothers that received a consent letter agreed to participate in the study. Only one such mother that I initially contacted did not participate in the study because she moved.

As a safeguard against misunderstandings on my part with regards to the Spanish language, as well as to alleviate any potential concerns that could have been raised by female participants, my wife, Gloria O’Brien, was involved in every aspect of the study when working with mothers individually. Gloria was born and raised in Guatemala and is herself a Spanish-speaking, naturalized citizen. She was approved as a “researcher” in the study by the Human Subjects Review Board after completing the university's Human Subjects Tutorial and signing a Confidentiality and Use Agreement form. In all of the cases, my wife, Gloria, made all of the phone calls to mothers and attended all of the interview and focus group sessions. While the presence of my wife did not address the power differential that might have had an impact on the mothers I interviewed, we both concur that the mothers we approached seemed more willing to participate after learning that I was not only a student but also a principal. The fact that a "principal" wanted to learn about them seemed to assign a certain importance to the association.

The principal, several teachers, and the office manager were also observed and interviewed in order to understand the context created by the school. The principal and involved parents were asked to identify teachers who are considered exemplary in the area of parent involvement as well as teachers who are considered neutral or even antagonistic towards parents. I also attended a staff meeting where the principal introduced me to the staff and I gave a brief presentation of my study. I gave teachers a Data Collection Information form (see appendix) that asked them to identify parents whom they considered to be involved and uninvolved. It also asked for teacher volunteers to participate in the study. Not even one form was ever returned to me. I asked several teachers about this, and they told me that they were so busy and burdened with paperwork that even though they were more than willing to give me information, they just couldn't take the time to complete a form that was not required. While the form was not very fruitful in obtaining information in writing, the teachers did recognize me for the remainder of my time at the site and they gave me numerous verbal ideas and suggestions, including the names of the four teachers who eventually agreed to participate in the study.

In the end, I was able to confirm the participation of 10 involved mothers, 10 uninvolved mothers, the principal, the office manager, and four teachers. All interviewees signed a consent form (see appendix) which also offered them a chance to withdraw from the study at any time.

Observations

Participant observations were the initial method used to generate data after obtaining access to the site. Participant observations are characterized by the participation of the researcher for extended periods of time in the daily lives of those being studied (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). When I began my observations, I initially did my best to be as invisible as possible. I thought that I would have more access to the parents and their worlds if they did not see me as a researcher or educator. I even asked the principal to not say anything about me to the parents, especially at major events. I soon found out that as parents saw me interacting with the principal they had more trust and openness towards me as a researcher. Looking back, I think that many had wondered what a strange man was doing on the campus even though it appeared that he did not have any children studying at the school. As the principal clearly demonstrated her stamp of approval on my presence at the site, parents became much more comfortable and open with me. As noted earlier, the fact that I was a principal seemed to be an additional advantage when asking many of these same parents to participate in formal interviews.

Clearly, the researcher has an impact on the surroundings being studied as he becomes part of that social world. This was clearly the case in several instances when I was introduced by the principal during school events or when I was asked to make a brief presentation on Threats and School Safety at the final ELAC. At each SSC, inevitably, I was asked for my opinions or to provide information on key agenda items, especially when the principal was not present. For those present at the meetings, I was just another educator with information that could help them and they saw no reason why I shouldn't share what I knew with the group. In fact, failure to do so would have been considered rude, closing rather than opening avenues of interaction and trust.

Additionally, the researcher recognizes that he comes to the setting with values, interests and a long biography that influences her perceptions of the phenomenon under study. Reflexivity asks the researcher to look for both his impact on the setting as well as his perception of what has been observed in order to engage in systematic inquiry that tests the validity of what has been described (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Briggs, 1986). The researcher must use reflexivity to account for that impact and incorporate it into the analysis.

I entered the field with an attitude of respect towards Latinos and Latino culture. I have worked closely with Latinos for more than 20 years in a variety of roles and relationships, including that of husband to a “Chapina” from Guatemala for more than 15 years. My personal beliefs concur with the research that finds that Latinos care deeply about their children and their education. My life experience has shown me that through hard work and dedication most Latinos are doing everything they can to improve their lives and the lives of their families. As a principal who works with Latino parents on a daily basis, I want to learn as much as I can about them so that I can better serve them and the students at my school. Recognizing and making these views explicit is a necessary step in reflexivity. Biases do not make it impossible to enter the field or analyze the data with an open mind, but they must be accounted for and managed by both the reader and researcher alike in order to mitigate their influence on the findings (Rivero, 2006).

Participant observations of parents and school personnel took place in a variety of times and settings. Field notes were taken at school wide meetings and events during the study period, as well as before and after school to see how parents interacted both formally and informally with school personnel and each other. Observations were scheduled during the school day to observe the participation of parent volunteers as well as the treatment of parents when they come to the office. The number of meetings and events was determined by the site that was chosen. Generally, schools are required to hold five SSC meetings and four to five ELAC meetings each year. I attended three SSC meetings and three ELAC meetings that took place during the study period. I also attended major school events, including Back-to-School Night, the Christmas Concert, Literacy Night, Math Night, and the Annual Title I and Annual English Language Learner meetings. The school did not have any sporting events during the study period. Data from these observations was used in the development of questions for both the interviews and the focus group meetings.

Interviews

The primary data source for this study mirrored Swidler’s (2001) use of interviews to discover the variations on how culture is used by parents. This was of necessity for several reasons. First, since information was needed from those families who have been described as uninvolved by educators in their children’s education, observations of these parents was limited. Second, in order to discover how both “involved” and “uninvolved” parents use their culture to make decisions, observations alone could not provide that kind of data.

While participant observations were taking place, interviews with both parents and school personnel were scheduled at the school, home, or other acceptable location to the participants at a time that was most convenient for them. Parent interviews were one to two hours in length and, initially at least, were comprised of two distinct segments. The first segment was a semi-structured interview with each parent in the study providing extended discussion of the parent’s history and views on education. Questions were framed in such a way as to elicit detailed stories, comparisons between Mexico and the United States, and the cultural resources available to parents and how these resources are used (Swidler, 2001). Parents were asked to describe their upbringing, education, and schooling. They were also asked about their experiences with schools in the United States, including their understanding of school expectations. Questions were formulated to address the six types of parent involvement identified by Joyce Epstein (2001). Parents were asked about education and schooling as it relates to their children and to describe their home activities.

Originally, a second phase of the parent interview was to be comprised of vignettes that were aimed at allowing parents to give their views on dilemmas or common challenges relating to children and schooling in the United States which parents might face or at least be aware of others who have faced such ordeals. These vignettes were designed to probe each parent's beliefs and processes for decision making. However, it became clear after the second interview that these vignettes were not accomplishing their intended goal. First, the vignettes extended the length of the interview beyond a reasonable amount of time. Second, the responses only seemed to mirror information that the parent had already expressed during the first part of the interview. At an early stage of the interview process, I decided to use the content of the vignettes during the focus group sessions rather than during the individual interviews.

During the interviews, follow up questions were used to clarify positions, point out any contradictions that occurred within the interview itself, and introduce possible ramifications for stated positions in an attempt to better understand the way parents utilize their cultural repertoires in determining strategies of action (Swidler, 2001). Likewise, participants were free to offer different and/or additional information than was asked by the researcher. All parent interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio taped, and later transcribed.

Parents seemed genuinely pleased that someone cared enough to listen to their thoughts and opinions (Briggs, 1986). However, even the most involved mothers made it clear that they never would have responded to the questions in written form if I had given them a survey to complete. The interview process allowed access to their life stories and beliefs that would not have been possible using other methods.

Staff interviews were conducted using a prepared list of questions that focus on expectations, experiences, philosophy, their description of immigrant Mexican parents, understanding of NCLB, and the development of the site Parent Involvement policy and its impact on the school. The interviews allowed staff to explain actions that were observed during participant observations. As with the parents, the staff also expressed their satisfaction that someone was interested in their thoughts and ideas. One teacher even sent me an e-mail, thanking me for the opportunity to participate in the study.

A small financial remuneration of $20 was given for the interview to both parents and staff. Most individuals from both groups stated that they did not want to take the money. However, I insisted as it had been part of our agreement. The money was always given inside of a hand written thank you card.

Focus Groups

Upon completion of the interviews and initial analysis of the parent answers, two focus group sessions were conducted and videotaped, one for the parents characterized as "involved" and one for those who are described as "uninvolved." These focus groups were organized around meeting times that were most convenient for the participants and included food as both an ice breaker and motivator to attend. An additional financial remuneration of $20 was given for participation in the focus group.

A focus group format was used to produce additional data by combining the interview process in a group setting which allowed for additional participant observation of parents (Morgan, 1988; Krueger, 1988). Focus groups provide an opportunity for the researcher to observe how parents respond spontaneously to one another using their natural vocabularies and challenges to one another’s positions (Levy, 1979). Focus groups provide the researcher an additional opportunity for clarification of issues that were raised during the interviews. The focus groups were particularly helpful for producing additional data of the “uninvolved’ parents since there were fewer opportunities to observe them at the school site. Questions for this phase of the study were developed based on responses to questions during the individual interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Sessions also included several vignettes that were eliminated from the majority of the one-to-one parent interviews.

Document Collection

While the school is not the primary focus of this study, it is the institutional context for behaviors related to parental involvement. Schools produce a variety of documents that are distributed to parents and/or teachers via the students, mail service, e-mail, at meetings, or other means. Some of these documents relate directly to parent involvement while others may seemingly be unrelated but have an impact on the views of parents. A copy of each document sent to all parents, documents that are available to parents but not distributed directly, and minutes from all current meetings as well as minutes that are available for previous year’s meetings were analyzed for a variety of items which include: parent input, content, engagement, readability, translation, policy issues, and requests for parent involvement (Hanson et al., 1992). Additional interview questions were developed based on the findings. Document collection was ongoing throughout the period of the study. The researcher worked with the school office manager to ensure that a copy of all documents sent home to parents was collected in a folder that was picked up regularly.

Data Analysis

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), data analysis within ethnography "is not a distinct stage of the research" (p. 205). During interviews, the researcher decides to ask additional questions based on his real time analysis of the conversation. The notes that are taken, the data, do not include everything that was said or done, but rather, they represent a careful selection of information that the researcher deems to be most important. They contain both what is said and how it is said as interpreted through the researcher. Even while field notes are being taken with the intent of accurately describing the setting, actions, and words of those being observed, analysis is taking place in the form of personal notes and interpretations either on the field or soon afterwards when the notes are being worked up and expanded upon (Lareau, 2000). It is at this early stage of the study that reflexivity can often best be utilized and articulated in order to account for the subjectivity of the researcher in order to produce the rich data that will be needed to answer the research questions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

This ongoing analysis, however, does not diminish the need for a formal, systematic analysis of the data as well. In fact, the ongoing analysis acts as a progressive problem solving (Erickson, 1986) or funnel (Agar, 1996) that takes unstructured data and categorizes it based on both prior theory, and emergent themes and patterns. These concepts are the researchers attempt to make sense of the data. As concepts begin to take shape, the researcher must return to the data to check the trustworthiness of the patterns.

I entered the field with several initial categories that were identified in the literature and are articulated in my theoretical framework (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). My analysis of the data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents begins with Swidler's (2001) conceptual framework for theorizing about the use of culture and Epstein's (2001) six types of parent involvement to categorize patterns of parent involvement practices and beliefs.

A triangulation of the data is used to check inferences from one data source to be checked against another for validity. Special attention is paid to the comparison between the involved and uninvolved parents. Disconfirming evidence is also analyzed since data that fails to fit the initial theoretical constructs is often helpful for evaluating their usefulness as well as providing a starting place for future research.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations associated with this study begin with the fact that there is so little research that captures the voices of the participants that I have chosen for this study. In particular, research that attempts to capture the views of parents who are described as uninvolved at the school site or detached from the school are almost non-existent. This piece of interpretive research, while provocative and suggestive, is primarily descriptive and exploratory, and only begins to scratch the surface of how immigrant parents use their culture to make choices regarding their children's formal education in the United States. I have attempted to add to the knowledge base in education by providing insights from a concrete case that “will help us to act more intelligently in future contexts” (Wehlage, 1981). It will be contingent upon the reader to make the appropriate connections to future cases. Additional research is needed to build upon these initial findings.

An additional limitation resulted from my decision to formally interview only immigrant mothers from Mexico. By limiting the confounding variables in this way, I hoped to garner more reliable information on the largest group of immigrants while recognizing that its usefulness would also be diminished when making applications to other groups from Latin America. Furthermore, by formally interviewing only mothers (I did talk to several fathers informally, and I was told about Mexican immigrant fathers second-hand by their wives), the perspective of fathers was substantially limited.

Finally, due to homogenous demographics of the school, including a principal who is a bilingual Mexican American, as is a large part of the school personnel, the experiences described in this study may vary significantly from schools that are less homogenous or where school personnel are unable to communicate with immigrant parents in Spanish. This, too, was a deliberate choice based on the data showing that a high number of SED, immigrant students attend schools with similar backgrounds (Orfield & Lee, 2007). The choice of an elementary school also allowed for a greater likelihood of finding evidence of parent involvement which often is not the case in secondary settings.

Summary

I designed and conducted an interpretive study in order to provide a cultural analysis of, and explanation for, the strategies of action used by Mexican immigrant mothers to make decisions about their involvement in their children's education in the United States. I chose to conduct my study in an urban setting in Southern California. I focused on one school that was predominantly Latino, high poverty, and had a sizeable ELL population. I gathered data for this study through participant observations, interviews, focus groups, and document collection over an eight month period of time from August 2008 through March 2009. Generalizability is the primary limitation of the study. However, the validity of the interpretations and analysis will add to the knowledge base in education by providing insights from a concrete case that will help us do a better job working with parents and educating children in the future.

CHAPTER 4

The Mexican Immigrant Mothers

The primary theoretical framework used to guide this study and the common thread that unites the observational and interview data in an attempt to understand what it means for Mexican immigrant mothers to value education is Ann Swidler's (1986, 2001) model of "cultural repertoires." Swidler (2001) employed the cultural repertories model as a way of thinking about variations in the way culture is used by a relatively homogenous group. Likewise, this ethnographic case study addresses variations in Mexican immigrant parent involvement by focusing on how a relatively homogenous group of Mexican immigrant parents, primarily mothers, use their cultural repertoires to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the U.S.

In this chapter, I will introduce the reader to the immigrant Mexican mothers who came to make up the core group of this study. I will describe both the similarities and differences in their upbringing as well as begin to describe the diverse ways that they have chosen to respond to schooling in the U.S.

Connected or Detached

From the onset of this study, I struggled with the widespread terminology used by educators that attempts to describe parents as either "involved" or "uninvolved." As I will show, even with the addition of the prepositional phrase "at school," the terms are often inadequate descriptors. As the study progressed, and especially during my analysis of the data, I found that I could no longer think of the parents using this terminology. For example, parents who might be described as the least involved at school did register their children for classes, made sure their children made it to the school every day (or most days), and attended the parent-teacher conference twice a year with few exceptions.

Furthermore, those parents who were celebrated by staff and other parents alike as examples of involvement at school did, at times, fail to attend important meetings and did not volunteer every day due to life's interruptions and/or personal choices. As I will demonstrate, involvement at school is not an either/or proposition, but rather a continuum of behaviors and beliefs that is constantly changing. I concur with Boethel (2003) that involvement is better understood as a "connection" between families and the school. Parents who are not involved at school or with school personnel might more accurately be understood as "detached" from the school rather than uninvolved in the formal education of their child. For the remainder of this study, I will utilize the word connection or connected when referring to parents that demonstrated a high level of involvement at the school and, for categorization purposes, when using their names, I will label them with a (C). Those parents who were not connected at school, or at least were significantly less connected than schools purport to want, will be described as detached and labeled with a (D).

Finding the Mothers

While there may be no such thing as a "typical" or "average" school, it was my intention to find a school, and a group of parents and educators, that could best be described as "ordinary." At least it had to be "ordinary" in a Southern California, high Latino immigrant, socioeconomically disadvantaged kind of way. I was not looking for a school with perfect parents or a principal who was necessarily exemplary in her work with parents. At the same time, I did not want a school know for its problems and contentious relationship between parents and staff. I wanted a school that avoided the extremes and would allow the greatest number of people to recognize and relate to the milieu. My goals were to interview and observe a seemingly homogeneous group of immigrant Mexican mothers and then look for within group similarities and differences that might open up a window into how culture impacts its members in an important aspect of their daily life, namely, the schooling of their children. What I found and shall describe below may not be “ordinary,” but it has been my aim to describe that which is representative and extends beyond the case study presented here.

My goal of discovering variations within a relatively homogenous group required me to seek out both those parents who were connected with the school and those who were detached. From the start, I knew that finding connected parents was not going to be the problem. Connected parents are frequently at the school, are well know by the staff, and their names appear on numerous sign-in sheets. Past studies have often focused exclusively on connected parents due to their availability and disposition to volunteer (thus making them connected). My greatest challenge was not only to locate and observe parents who were detached from the school, but to then convince them to participate in my study.

As I describe in chapter three, I finally settled on Orange Elementary. The enthusiasm displayed by the principal, Cristina Noche, to participate in the study and her declared willingness to help me locate the study subjects, initially gave me hope that my task might not be as daunting as originally envisioned. However, that momentary relief was promptly laid aside when none of the names provided by the principal matched the parameters of the study. I quickly learned that this was my study, and I was going to have to find each participant for myself. My strategy for finding the mothers I needed was to start by spending time at the school site and observe the actions and interactions of the parents in a variety of settings.

My routine of observing parents at Orange Elementary brought me into contact with Elena Rodas (C) who became the first connected mother to agree to participate in my study. I met Elena[1] my first morning at Orange Elementary as she was safeguarding the upper grade hallways, and I bumped into her during almost every subsequent visit. As soon as she heard that I needed volunteers to help me with a study, she immediately volunteered to help. She gave me her name and phone number even before I could take out my parent consent letter. When she took the letter, she assured me that there would not be any problem and wanted to know when and where I wanted to have the interview. Her enthusiasm provided me with a great deal of hope that the study would be a success.

From there, I was able to utilize a particularly useful piece of information that I received from the principal in my search for parent study participants. Mrs. Noche recommended that I attend the Thursday Volunteers group. Other than participation in school meetings, the primary outlet for providing parents with an opportunity to volunteer at school was the Thursday Volunteers group. These gatherings were formal in the sense that these sessions occurred at the school site and were under the supervision of the principal and/or resource teacher, but these get-togethers were highly informal in their format and function. All of the connected mothers participated in the Thursday Volunteers sessions at one time or another. Mrs. Noche told me that these were her most involved mothers. On the other hand, none of the detached mothers ever attended any of these gatherings for a variety of reasons that ranged from a lack of time to a lack of interest.

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[1] I have chosen to refer to Elena Rodas and the other mothers by their first name in subsequent references within a section unlike my references to school staff where I use Miss or Mrs. I have chosen to do it this way because I never heard any of the mothers referred to by their last names. Similarly, I never heard anyone refer to any certificated personnel by their first name.

Orange Elementary did not have a formal group of mothers such as a PTA or booster club for fundraising. At the second School Site Council (SSC, 11/19/08), I was asked to discuss the budget crisis because the principal was not at the meeting. At one point, I told the parents that the only account that could not be frozen or swept by the district was the donations account. I then said, “Parents, we need you to help us raise funds.” The resource teacher informed me that they did not have a booster club or parent group for fundraising. SSC member, Doris Silva (C), then explained that the booster clubs ended because parent volunteers were not only concerned about how the money they raised was spent, but they were also frustrated because only a few parents participated in the fundraising activities.

Volunteering in the classroom was also limited. Occasionally, a mother would be allowed to sit in a kindergarten or first grade classroom and prepare materials for the teacher’s classroom, but none of the immigrant mothers I spoke with every worked one-on-one with students on academic matters at school. As the name implies, when Volunteer Thursdays transpired, which was not every week, they took place on Thursdays. They began as soon after the final morning bell which signaled the official start of the school day as mothers showed up to begin working. There was no official start or end time. Mothers came and went throughout the session. However, most mothers made their way to the resource room after ensuring that their children were in class, and the parents who did not plan on staying were making their way to the main gate to exit the campus. The work sessions usually lasted one to two hours, depending on the tasks that were left for them to do and the number of volunteers who showed up to participate. The primary function of the get-together was to complete projects that classroom teachers had left for them. The group was also asked to help with school level tasks such as generic mailings or the preparation of program materials for distribution to the classrooms.

The volunteer group was always relatively small. There could be as few as three or four and as many as a dozen or more. The size of the resource room limited the potential size of the group. It did not have seating for more than 20. The first time I attended one of their gatherings on October 9, 2008, I already recognized many of the mothers from previous school meetings and events. Mrs. Noche told me early on in the study that the *Thursday Volunteers* session would be one of my best opportunities to meet and recruit the most involved mothers at the site for my study.

Early in the study, I was unsure what the best approach would be to gain their trust. I was somewhat concerned that if they knew I was a principal that they would be afraid to open up to me. Conversely, if I presented myself as a graduate student, I was not sure they would understand that either. I had asked the principal to not introduce me at any of the meetings, including this gathering. It was obvious that she knew me, but at first, no one knew in what capacity. I was betting on my social skills to open the door, and then, later, my connections and role at the school as means of paving the way once I was accepted.

Clearly, I could not attend a volunteer gathering and simply sit and observe them as they worked. I had to immerse myself wholeheartedly in the participant-observer experience. If I had failed to help out, I was convinced that they would have thought me strange, at best, or, even worse, lazy. When I first entered the room, there were about 12 mothers, two strollers, a child of about two or three years of age, and a student in fourth grade. I later discovered that the fourth grade student attended a school in a neighboring district that was off track, and he was visiting his aunt that day. For this immigrant mother and aunt, it was natural to include her nephew in all of her daily activities, including volunteering at the school site. The student did not seem unhappy about being there, and he did a lot of work just like his aunt.

Mrs. Noche did her best to make parents feel welcomed and appreciated. There was always coffee and some “pan dulce” (Mexican sweet bread) offered to the volunteers. With a smile and an energetic voice that was loud enough for all those around us to hear, Mrs. Noche did her best to explain to me what the mothers did and what she did for them. For example, she told me, “These mothers help out *every* Thursday. They are very involved. And I always do special things for them, too. We always have coffee and treats, and every once in awhile, I get them breakfast or a nice lunch, ¿Verdad?” (Right?) While she was there, Mrs. Noche moved quickly around the table where the mothers were working, interacting with each one. Whenever she got close to me, she would undoubtedly point out the exemplary aspects of her school and the parents. After approximately 10 minutes, Mrs. Noche left the room and headed towards the office.

As I made my way to one of the tables, I greeted the mothers who had already started to work. “Buenos días. Me llamo Gregorio.” (Good morning. My name is Gregorio.) Several mothers, but not all, responded, “Buenos días.” Esther Muniz (C) almost immediately asked me, “¿Va a ayudarnos? (Are you going to help us?) I replied, “Claro que sí.” (Of course.) I have used the name “Gregorio” almost exclusively since I began taking Spanish classes in junior high. In this setting, I had hoped that the mothers would recognize that I was both friendly and not trying to set myself on a higher level than them. I also hoped that by making packets with them, they would *see* that I respected their efforts.

Esther showed me what to do. We were separating pages from the second grade workbook and putting the similar pages together to make packets for the teachers. Some of the pages were missing so it was important to pay attention. Other mothers who were there also listened to Esther’s instructions to me. There were perhaps three or four mothers who knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing. Other mothers were like me and needed to follow the leaders. While I was separating the papers, another group of mothers was cutting and gluing papers with little pictures for the ELD (English Language Development) classroom focus walls.

I was not able to pay much attention to the other groups because I had to concentrate on what I was doing in order to keep myself from making mistakes. The pages looked similar except for the page number. The task was more difficult than one might expect. The mothers in my group were not talking about anything other than the task at hand. At the other groups, I could hear mothers talking and laughing but I could not make out what they were saying. When I heard laughing, it was usually because someone had made a mistake. At one point, I asked the mothers in my group what grade level of workbook we were working on. At first no one seemed to know and then Esther told us second grade.

These mothers were not volunteering just to help their own children. They were volunteering at the school site in order to make the school a better place for all students. The meaning of their behavior was confirmed again and again in my interviews with the connected mothers. They told me that they were involved to make Orange Elementary a better place for children. That is why it did not particularly matter what grade level the workbook was that we were working on. They were there to help whoever needed it.

While they certainly gained social capital by participating frequently at the school, their behavior also reveals their beliefs about the value of education. Education was important to them and their children’s futures. They told me, and, more importantly, they showed me by engaging in repetitive activities that required concentration and dedication. Some did it better than others, and they, in turn, became the ad hoc teachers/leaders of the group. When my group completed our task, the mothers joined other groups who were not yet finished.

I decided to talk to the mothers one by one and tell them about my research project and find out if they were interested in participating. Mrs. Noche had already pointed out to me the mothers who most often participated at the school, and many of them I recognized from the official school meetings I had already attended. As I talked to each mother, I explained to them that I wanted to talk to mothers who studied in Mexico to find out what they thought about schools in the United States. I made it clear that “No hay un respuesta correcta ni incorrecta. Yo quiero saber sus pensamientos.” (There is no right or wrong answer. I want to know your thoughts.) I explained to them that I would give them $20 for their time if they were willing to participate. “Su tiempo es muy valioso.” (Your time is very valuable.) I also explained that my wife, who is from Guatemala, would be at the interviews.

I talked to each mother individually. Of course, the other mothers could overhear what I was saying, but I had hoped that with the repetition of the message, the notion of a study would become clearer. None of the mothers I spoke to that morning had ever participated in a study before, and I was not sure if they truly understood why I needed their participation in order to complete my work at the university. Many also found it difficult to understand why I would be willing to pay them just to answer questions. I also disclosed that while I worked for the district, this study was not for the district but for my studies at the university. One mother told me that she was interested in participating, but I would need to talk to her husband first to make sure that “todo está bien” (everything is ok). In other words, I needed to get his permission. As I made my way around the table, I somehow missed talking to one mother who said to me at the end, “A mí no me habló.” (You didn’t talk to me.) Even though some of the mothers were quite timid, all of them were willing to give me their names and phone numbers, and they took one of my parent consent letters to read at home.

While I had previously observed most of the mothers who were there that morning at other school meetings and events, seven of the 10 connected mothers that eventually participated in my study were formally introduced to me that day at the Thursday Volunteers gathering. I never received any calls or questions from them regarding the parent consent letter, but all of them were willing to sign the consent form before their formal interviews. Later, when they met my wife and research assistant, Gloria, much of the initial anxiety they may have felt when I first described the study seemed to subside. A week later, several of these mothers also introduced me to the ninth connected mother in my study, Delia Franco (C), as well as several mothers who later became part of the detached focus group.

The final connected mother to join my study was Dora Sanchez (C), a highly focused woman that I had observed at many school events. Her participation in her children's education was most notable during the second evening of the Family Literacy Night. Dora and I both attended the same second grade session. Her intensity and focus on the presenters caught my attention from the beginning of the session. While she never asked any questions during the training, her specific questions to the teacher as the rest of the group were leaving demonstrated to me that she knew what was needed to help her children. I was even more impressed when, several minutes later, I entered the third grade classroom to meet up with my research assistant, and there was Dora, now talking to one of the teachers in the third grade session, in Spanish, with her husband at her side. Her husband had attended the third grade session while she attended the second grade session. She was intent on knowing two things: what were the teacher's expectations regarding homework and what could she do to help her son raise his reading level.

A month later, I saw her and her husband again at the Winter Program. I quickly introduced myself and told them about my study. We talked for nearly 15 minutes about school, their expectations for their children, and what I wanted Dora to do if she were to participate in my study. She accepted the invitation with the full support of her husband. The list of 10 connected mothers was complete.

Finding the list of 10 detached mothers was not as simple. While I never used the term “detached” or uninvolved with the connected mothers, they understood that I also wanted to interview mothers who did not come to school meetings or volunteer at school, regardless of the reason, and they were willing to help me find possibilities. I think the principal found it difficult to make suggestions for this list since she only seemed to want me to talk with parents who would speak favorably about the school, and she could not be sure what mothers who were detached might say.

The first detached mother who agreed to participate in the study, Laura Rodriguez (D), was the sister-in-law of one of the connected mothers, Celia Lemus (C). She was a working mom who was willing to meet with me if I could plan it around her work schedule. Our one-on-one interview took place on a Sunday evening after she finished work in her cramped apartment that was filled with family members and things.

Three of the detached mothers were individuals that my assistant and I met at the Winter Program. We met two of them in line and one while waiting for the program to begin. All three attended a presentation that included their children performing, but did not attend any other meetings or events at the school.

Two of the detached mothers actually contacted me after hearing about the study from one of the connected mothers. Luz Feliciano (D) was a former parent leader who had been deeply offended years earlier by a high school principal. She no longer participated at any school, but her leadership qualities were intact. She brought me into contact with Blanca Resto (D), and, after learning more about the study, Diana Salcedo (D). Diana, in turn, introduced us to Maria Cruz (D).

I spoke with dozens of detached mothers during my time at Orange Elementary, but most were unwilling to be formally interviewed. They did not mind answering my questions, but they did not want to sign any forms. One mother, a neighbor of Dora Sanchez (C), initially spoke to my wife on the phone and agreed to be in the study, but then changed her mind and never answered her phone again. Dora told us that she was too afraid to be in the study even with Dora's assurances. The final two mothers were acquaintances of several of the connected mothers and they agreed to sign the consent forms and participate in the study.

In retrospect, the $20 I gave each mother for both the one-on-one interview and focus group interview may not have been as helpful as I initially anticipated. While it certainly did not diminish the likelihood that a mother would participate in the study, in most cases, the money was not the deciding or motivating factor either. A mother's decision to formally participate in the study or not came down to trust. All of the mothers who agreed to be in the study felt that they could trust me and that what I was doing would be beneficial to children, especially those of Mexican immigrant parents.

The Connected Mothers

All of the connected mothers I interviewed were born in Mexico and only attended school in Mexico. Their upbringing and experiences in Mexico show both commonalities and differences (see Table 4.1). Most of the mothers came from large families. While the range in family size is from four to 16 siblings, eight of the 10 mothers come from families with eight or more children. Furthermore, while all of them attended elementary school, most did not go to high school (la preparatoria), and only one of them graduated from high school. Only three lived in cities while seven lived in either towns (pueblos) or large farming communities (ranchos).

The participation of their parents in their education is perhaps the area of greatest discrepancy. Three of the mothers stated unequivocally that their parents were not involved in their education and did not offer them any support or encouragement. Three said that they received support from their mother, but their father was either absent or, in the case of Dora Sanchez (C), opposed to the idea of girls going to school. Norma Robles (C) said that her father was the most involved in her education and attended the school meetings. Esther Muiz (C) lived with her grandparents and said that her grandmother helped her to stay in school through sixth grade. Only two mothers said that both parents were supportive of their education.

Their experiences after immigrating to the U.S. also are a unique blend of similarities and variations. To begin with, across the board, their nuclear families are much smaller. These connected mothers have between two and five children with six of the ten having only two children. The majority of the mothers said they watch two or less

Table 4.1 Overview of Connected Mothers

	Name	Birth place/siblings	Education	Children	Additional Descriptors
1	Elena Rodas	Ocampo, Durango, Mexico 16 siblings (she could not remember if she was number 12 or 13)	Attended middle school (la secundaria). For a time was paid by the government to teach kindergarten.	2	•Came to USA when she was 15 •Father was a" bracero" (field worker) in USA •Outgoing, but did not want to discuss youth •Enjoys volunteering at school (DELAC rep) •Friendly, but not close to connected mothers •Watches 1 hour of TV daily
2	Celia Lemus	Aguas Calientes, Mexico 4 sisters and 4 brothers	Completed high school (la preparatoria). Parents sent her to high school so that she would not get married. Her mother always encouraged her to study	2	•Has been in the USA for 7 years •Initially seems timid, but is very involved at school and participated fully in the interviews •Helped locate detached mothers for the study •Watches 6 or 7 hours of TV daily
3	Ruth Gamez	Michoacán, Mexico 9 siblings	Attended middle school (la secundaria). Parents brought them to school early each day.	2	•Came to the USA in 1995 •Timid •Does not say a lot (shortest interview) •Watches 2 hours of TV daily, Soap Operas (Novelas)
4	Doris Silva	Exatlán, Jalisco, Mexico 4 sisters and 4 brothers	Attended middle school (la secundaria). Mother was always supportive. Primarily self-taught since she had to work cleaning homes after her father died.	3	•Came to the U.S. since husband moved here •Very involved at the school (SSC & ELAC) •Volunteered for nearly 16 years at the school •Open participation in all interviews •Strong opinions/leader •Watches 1 hour of TV daily, Soap Operas (Novelas)
5	Norma Robles	Ayotlan, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico 5 sisters and 5 brothers (she was the sixth)	Attended middle school (la secundaria). Father was most interested in her studies. Her parents attended the meetings at school.	3	•Came to U.S. 12 years ago for a better life •She is a stay at home mom, and says that it is "worth it" even if things are tight financially •Strong opinions/leader •Her husband said, "Everything is for our children." •Both were interested in helping the teachers at school to improve the school •Does not like to watch TV

Table 4.1 Overview of Connected Mothers (cont.)

	Name	Birth place/siblings	Education	Children	Additional Descriptors
6	Susana Mejia	Nayarit, Mexico 13 siblings (she was the seventh)	Only attended elementary school (la primaria). Her parents never talked about school. They only sent them. Mentioned that her husband attended high school in the USA.	4	•Came to the USA in 1986 at the age of 15 •Father feared she would be taken (se roban) to be married by someone in the town as was the custom for young girls between 14 and 15 •Felt children did not know much even though they received good grades •Preferred the Mexican education system that required students to memorize the answers
7	Dora Sanchez	From a small ranch in Michoacán, Mexico 9 siblings (she was the third)	Attended elementary school (la primaria). The middle school opened when she was 15, but she only attended one year because she was embarrassed about her age.	2	•Came to U.S. 17 years ago •Married in the USA •Not socially connected to connected mothers •Researcher noticed involvement at school •Utilizes materials/strategies at home •Watches 2 hours of TV daily
8	Esther Muniz	Born in Mexico City, but raised in Uruapa, Michoacán, Mexico 4 siblings (including 2 half sisters)	Only attended elementary school (la primaria). Her grandparents paid for studies. Is proud that her husband completed his studies at the university in the USA.	2	•Came to the USA in 1995 •Member of the SSC and ELAC •Does a lot of volunteering at school •Most important thing is that her children become “someone” in life and not a housewife •Watches 1 hour of TV daily, Soap Operas (Novelas)
9	Delia Franco	San Miguel, Jalisco, Mexico 6 siblings (she was the third)	Was not able to complete elementary school (la primaria) because she had to repeat 2 years.	5	•Came to the USA in 1992 •Her father was murdered when she was three •Childhood was difficult •Outgoing and opinionated •Strict with her own children •Watches 2 hours of TV daily
10	Carmen Santos	Los García de Zacatecas, Mexico 9 siblings (she was the fourth)	Only attended elementary school (la primaria) because of the cost and distance to the school. Said her parents were involved in her education.	2	•Came to U.S. in 2001 with her aunt and uncle •Feels that even though her level of education was limited, she needs to help her children •Youngest mother interviewed •Watches 2 hours of TV daily

hours of television per day with most admitting to being interested in watching Spanish language “Telenovelas” (Soap Operas) at night.

Each of the connected mothers also displayed a range of personality traits that went from outgoing and self-assured to timid and uncertain. Several, like Elena Rodas (C) and Doris Silva (C) were strong leaders who knew what they wanted to accomplish and they were willing to lead the way. Others, like Carmen Santos (C) and Ruth Gamez (C) were followers who hoped that they were making the best decisions for their children. Still others, like Norma Robles (C), Celia Lemus (C), and Dora Sanchez (C) had an inner strength that did not always present itself vocally in a group setting, but was nonetheless firm in the conviction of the importance of their actions for their children’s futures.

The magnitude and impact of their connectedness to the school also varied. For example, Elena Rodas (C) was one of the fixtures at the school and could always be depended upon to fulfill her volunteer responsibilities. Every morning that I visited the site, Elena was guarding the entrance to the upper grade hallway so that no students could access the upper grade classrooms. She was well known by staff, students, and parents alike. Elena was a volunteer, but she carried out her duties as one could only hope for from the most faithful of employees. I often saw students look past her longingly to the other side, but she was not about to let anyone get by her.

Elena also took on the responsibility of directing traffic in front of the school. It was not uncommon in the morning for me first to see her in front of the school, and then, 10 minutes later, see her in the back of the school in her normal location, ready to assume her duty, blocking the passage of all students to the upper grade hallway. In the afternoon she was there again, directing traffic, trying to give the bus some room to park so that students could get on board. She did all of this while maintaining a smile and sharing a warm greeting.

Elena was always well dressed. Her appearance reminded me of an individual getting ready to go to church. Her hair was always nicely combed, she wore make-up, and she always wore high heels and a skirt. I remember the first time I saw Elena wearing a bright orange vest. It seemed so out of place to see such a brash item hung over such nice clothing. When we greeted each other, she proudly said to me, “Ahora, nadie me puede decir que no me puede ver” (Now no one can tell me that they can’t see me). We both laughed. She explained that the vest was only for use in front of the school when she was directing traffic.

While Elena always smiled and greeted the other parents as she passed by, she was not a social butterfly. I never saw her talking with a group of parents. Elena was a doer, and she seemed to have little time (literally or figuratively) for idle conversation. She took her unpaid job very seriously and she always wanted me to know the importance of what she did for the school. Elena never had to worry; however, because I was amazed by how much time she spent at the school and how much work she did for free.

On the other hand, the volunteer efforts of Esther Muniz (C) were not always as consistent. Esther was quiet and tended to work in small groups or behind the scenes as she often did with the Thursday Volunteers. While she was a member of the SSC, she never voiced any opinions or ideas on how the school could be improved. At the focus group session, my research assistant and I had sensed a bit of tension between several of the connected mothers and the principal. Esther was so upset that she declared that she was planning on withholding her support from the school. The full reason for her aggravation did not come to light until the third ELAC meeting when Esther described a recent incident to the entire ELAC where she did not receive the support she expected from the principal with regards to an altercation that occurred in the bathroom with her daughter. Esther's feelings about the incident impacted her participation at the school, and possibly several other mothers with whom she was close.

The Detached Mothers

As with the connected mothers above, all of the detached mothers I interviewed were born in Mexico and attended school in Mexico. However, one of the detached mothers, Miriam Lopez (D), went to high school in the U.S. Their upbringing and experiences in Mexico also show both commonalities and differences (see Table 4.2). Most of the mothers came from large families. The range in family size is from four to 13 siblings. Five of the 10 mothers come from families with eight or more children. Furthermore, while all of them completed elementary school, three completed middle school (la secundaria), and two graduated from high school (one completed "la prepatoria" in Mexico and the other graduated in the U.S.). Only two lived in cities while eight lived in either towns (pueblos) or villages (aldeas).

As with the connected mothers, the participation of their parents in their education is also an area with significant discrepancies. Four of the mothers stated that their parents were not involved in their education and did not offer them any support or

Table 4.2. Overview of Detached Mothers

	Name	Birth place/siblings	Education	Children	Additional Descriptors
1	Laura Rodriguez	Born on a small ranch, but was raised in Jalisco, Mexico 8 siblings (she was the fifth)	Completed middle school (la secundaria). Her mother went to school meetings. Her father was demanding and checked her homework.	2	•Came to USA 7 years ago after father died •Works in a restaurant •Does not attend meetings because she works •Her mother attends some meetings for her •Enjoys Soap Operas (Novelas)
2	Esmeralda Campos	Los Balcones, Jalisco, Mexico (oldest of 3 siblings)	Attended elementary school (la primaria). Her parents only went to school for registration.	4	•Came to the USA 20 years ago when her father sent for her •Was scolded by teacher for not checking her kinder daughter's homework •Watches 3 or 4 hours of TV daily, movies and Soap Operas (Novelas)
3	Miriam Lopez	Born on a ranch, San Clemente, Guanajuato, Mexico 7 siblings (she was the second)	Attended elementary school (primaria) in Mexico; finished high school in U.S. Her parents were not involved in school. Father lived in USA. Mother only attended social events.	2	•Came to the USA 15 years ago when her father sent for her •Speaks very little English •Does not like to attend parent meetings •Watches 2 or 3 hours of TV daily, news and Soap Operas (Novelas)
4	Mercedez Juarez	Santo Romero, Puebla, Mexico (oldest of 6 siblings)	Completed elementary school (la primaria). Mother was very involved in schooling and was the voice of the parent group. Father lived in New York.	1	•Came to the USA 8 years ago at the age of 17 •Works at McDonalds •Wants to attend meetings but has no time •Watches TV 2 hours daily, Soap Operas (Novelas)
5	Blanca Resto	Tepig, Nayarit, Mexico (oldest of 3 siblings)	Attended middle school (la secundaria) and three semesters of high school (la preparatoria). Her father helped them with the homework and her mother attended parent meetings and knew her teachers.	1	•Came to the USA in 2003 for a better life •Came to the USA alone and then lived with an aunt •She wished all of the teachers were bilingual •Feels she would not learn anything if she were to attend the free English classes •Was one of the most interested in the money for participating in the interviews •Watches 2 hours of TV daily, likes Soap Operas (Novelas)

Table 4.2. Overview of Detached Mothers (cont.)

	Name	Birth place/siblings	Education	Children	Additional Descriptors
6	Luz Feliciano	Zamora, Michoacán, Mexico 11 siblings (she was the sixth)	She completed high school (la preparatoria) in Mexico to become a secretary.	4	•Came to the USA in 1985 with her husband •Strong opinions/leader •Sought out researcher to participate in study •Stopped involvement after incident with high school principal years earlier •Watches 4 or 5 hours of TV daily, likes Soap Operas (Novelas)
7	Catalina Ortiz	Llano Grande, Jalisco, Mexico 13 siblings (she was the tenth)	Completed elementary school (la primaria). Father never attended meetings and said school was for boys. Mother encouraged her to not end up like her. She walked nine miles to school. She remembers that teachers would hit the children.	3	•Came to the USA in 1996 with relatives •Married in the USA •Stay at home mom •Husband was in construction/beautiful home •Watches 2 hours of TV daily, likes Soap Operas (Novelas)
8	Diana Salcedo	Michoacán, Mexico (oldest of 9 siblings)	Completed middle school (la secundaria). Her father did not attend meetings, but he would help them with homework. Her mother could not read or write.	4	•Came to the USA 10 years ago •Stay-at-home mom •Concerned she cannot help her children with homework because she does not speak English •Husband was a teacher in Mexico who does not like schools in the USA •Watches 1.5 hours of TV daily
9	Maria Cruz	Achisita, Michoacán , Mexico 6 siblings (she was the third)	Completed elementary school (la primaria) and two years of middle school (secundaria). Parents only went to school for registration.	2	•Has lived in the USA for 19 years •Worked as a child because the family was very poor •Children threaten to turn her over to ICE •Watches only a little news on the TV
10	Ana Fuentes	Sanatenógenes, Durango, Mexico (oldest of 6 siblings)	Completed middle school (la secundaria). Parents did not attend school meetings: “Better to work than study.”	5	•Came to the USA in 1988 with her husband because they were so poor and then separated after arriving •Proud of oldest daughter who is doing well in college •Does not watch a lot of TV

encouragement. The parents of Ana Fuentes (D) told her, “mejor trabajar que estudiar” (it’s better to work than to study). Three said that they only received support from their mother. As with Dora Sanchez (C), the father of Catalina Ortiz (D) told her that school is only for boys. Three mothers said that both parents were supportive of their education even if they did not always attend school meetings.

Their experiences after immigrating to the U.S. also are a unique blend of similarities and variations. As with the connected mothers, their families in the U.S. are much smaller. These detached mothers have between one and five children with five of the ten having only one or two children. The majority of the mothers said that they watch four or less hours of television per day with most admitting to be interested in watching Spanish language “Telenovelas” (Soap Operas) at night.

Overall, there were not a lot of differences in the kinds of life experiences found in the backgrounds of the connected mothers and the detached mothers. The majority of both groups tended to live in small towns or villages. The majority of each group only completed elementary school with only one or two mothers from each group completing high school. Both groups had a mixed bag when it came to parental support in their education when they were in school with only a minority within each group expressing support from both parents. The detached mothers admitted to watching slightly more television on a daily basis than the connected mothers. While there were within group differences between the participants of each group, these differences were similar for both groups, making the two groups fairly homogenous overall, as intended.

While more difficult to observe directly, the detached mothers also displayed a range of personality traits that went from outgoing and self-assured to timid and uncertain. Luz Feliciano (D) was the only one to demonstrate strong leadership characteristics. She told us of her previous experiences working with schools until she was offended by her oldest son's high school principal. Blanca Resto (D) had a lot of opinions and she was willing to voice them, but she also was unwilling to act upon her own advice. Others, like Diana Salcedo (D), Maria Cruz (D), and Esmeralda Campos (D) were followers who were very uncertain about the decisions they were making for their children and even seemed unhappy about their situation in life. Still others, like Miriam Lopez (D), Mercedez Juarez (D), and Araceli Cisneros (D) displayed an inner strength that held high expectations for their children even if they were unable to participate in the school.

Due to their lack of presence at the school site, the detached mothers had only marginal influence on the school and its community. Luz Feliciano (D) was the only mother to mention that she kept up with the happenings at the school by way of the contacts she had with several of the connected mothers. While several detached mothers lamented that they could not spend more time at school because of their jobs, the majority did not express any interest in attending meetings or getting more involved at the school.

Summary

This ethnographic case study uses Swidler's (2001) culture as repertoire model to addresses variations in Mexican American parent involvement by focusing on how a relatively homogenous group of Mexican immigrant mothers use their cultural repertoire to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States. After locating a relatively homogenous school in Southern California that had a high Latino immigrant population, I set about finding 10 immigrant Mexican mothers who could be described as connected to the school and 10 immigrant Mexican mothers who could be described as being detached from the school.

After several leads from the principal turned out to be less than successful, my strategy for finding the mothers I needed was to start by spending time at the school site and observing the actions and interactions of the parents in a variety of settings. As a participant observer, I volunteered alongside the parents, answered questions at their meetings, learned new strategies alongside them at trainings, and I endeavored to exhibit acts of kindness towards parents and their children. While I was unaware of it at the time, these actions to gain their trust would not only help me to secure the assistance of connected mothers in my study, but they, in turn, were crucial in helping me locate and secure the participation in my study of detached mothers.

I obtained the participation of my first connected mother after getting to know her and her volunteer work at the school during my observations, and I was able to secure the participation of seven additional connected mothers at the Thursday Volunteers gathering. The participation of the final connected mother did not occur until after a number of observations at school meetings and events where the researcher was able to observe the participants intense focus and drive to help her children succeed.

It was much more difficult to secure the participation of 10 detached mothers. While many detached mothers were willing to answer my questions, they were afraid or unwilling to sign a consent form. Participants in the detached focus group were obtained through personal contact at school social events, friends and relatives of connected mothers, and even the friends of detached mothers in the study. The $20 I gave each mother for both the one-on-one interview and focus group interview may not have been as helpful as I initially anticipated. A mother’s decision to formally participate in the study or not came down to trust. All of the mothers who agreed to be in the study felt that they could trust me and that what I was doing would be beneficial to children, especially those of immigrant Mexican parents.

Overall, there were not a lot of differences in the kinds of life experiences found in the backgrounds of the connected mothers and the detached mothers. The majority of both groups came from small towns or villages in Mexico. The majority of each group only completed elementary school with only one or two that completed high school in each group. Both groups had a mixed bag of experiences when it came to parental support in their education when they were in school with only a minority within each group expressing support from both parents. The detached mothers admitted to watching slightly more television on a daily basis than the connected mothers. While there were within group differences between the participants of each group, these differences were similar for both groups, making the two groups fairly homogenous overall, as intended.

CHAPTER 5

Using the Tools: Strategies of Action

In chapter four, I introduce the reader to Orange Elementary and a group of Mexican immigrant mothers who came to make up the focus of this study. I describe how I divided these mothers into two groups, those connected to the school and those detached from the school, by applying a standard sociocultural definition of parent involvement as exemplified by scholars such as Epstein (1985, 2001). While it would be difficult to differentiate the two groups from one another based solely on the within group similarities and differences with regards to language, national origin, family size, years of schooling, and participation of their parents in their schooling in Mexico, they *are* distinguishable by their behaviors in relation to the public school that their children attend.

Given that these mothers are now making a life for themselves in the U.S. and they do not live in a bubble, their cultural experiences are brought to bear on their present realities in a tangible way each and every time their children go to school. The school as an institution places legal demands upon both students and their parents that cannot be avoided. Even detached mothers regularly find themselves having to deal with these demands of space and time as well as the myriad of individuals they come into contact with at the school and its environs. Additionally, while my focus group of mothers was undoubtedly impacted by the school, they, conversely, had a part to play in shaping the school itself. Furthermore, their experiences at the school and with the U.S. education system were not only actively being interpreted by their culture and worldview, but these experiences were causing their culture and views to evolve over time.

In this chapter, I will provide an interpretive/cultural analysis of the key types of patterned behaviors that these mothers exhibited towards the education of their children and the institution formally charged with their schooling. Based on Swidler (2001), I will describe these behaviors as “strategies of actions” which are the culturally shaped patterns of behavior that individuals routinely utilize when confronted with life’s challenges. For Swidler, “strategies of action are general solutions to the problem of how to organize action over time, rather than specific ways of attaining particular ends” (p.82). The focus, then, is on the *means* available to an individual within the framework of her culture and social world rather than an individual’s goals or particular ends. These observable behaviors or strategies of action are constrained by the repertoire of cultured capacities, or tools, that an individual possesses and will be described in the next chapter.

It should be noted that the descriptions of observed strategies of action in this chapter go beyond Swidler’s methodology that was based solely on interview data. By incorporating this added dimension to my study, I was able to triangulate the data in the analysis to locate both consistencies and discrepancies between what I was able to observe and what the mothers said about their own beliefs and behaviors in our conversations and interviews. I will describe the patterns of behavior that I observed and the strategies of action that parents engaged in as part of their daily routine as well as the occasional actions that revealed underlying skills and cultured capacities that, while not used as often, could be accessed when necessary.

The Daily Ingress and Egress of Students

School structure, both physical and organizational, dictates the whereabouts of both students and teachers during specific periods of time throughout the day. While the same does not always hold true for parents, there are times and events that occur on a school campus that one can utilize to predict the likelihood of encountering parents. The daily ingress and egress of students at the beginning and end of each school day provided the most consistent opportunity to observe the actions of the greatest number of parents “at school’ with their children and the school staff. Distinct patterns of behaviors were observed with regards to place and time as well as the custodial responsibilities of parents at the school during ingress and egress.

Place and Time

I will begin my analysis by describing the patterns of behaviors I observed when the vast majority of parent-school interactions took place, namely the ingress of the students each morning and egress of students at the end of the school day, and the impact of place and time on these behaviors. One thing that stands out to anyone approaching Orange Elementary is that the grounds are nicely manicured and well taken care of. The trees in the front of the school are large and majestic looking. There is no garbage in the front of the school. There are flowers and small bushes planted between the front of the building and the school’s sidewalk accented by woodchips. There is a large round mural, perhaps 12-14 feet in diameter, painted on the brick wall of the cafeteria. It is primarily green and orange and says, “Orange Elementary School” in large letters. In the middle of the mural is a cartoonish drawing of the school’s mascot wearing an orange jacket. He is holding two flags. One reads “Orange,” and the other reads, “Home of the Titans.” Along the longer yet lower office wall there is a flowing American flag painted on the wall with the words, “Striving for Excellence.”

The physical condition of the school is notable since the school is located in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood. By most accounts, Orange Elementary would be described as an inner city school. The homes in front of the school, while certainly older, small, one-story buildings, are also well maintained. This seems to coincide with a common refrain in Spanish, “Pobres pero limpios” (Poor but clean). The well-kept campus definitely communicates non-verbally the message that school is important and the school community takes pride in their school.

A large marquee is located in the center of the front lawn facing the street. The messages displayed on the marquee varied widely. At times it had a pithy saying like, “Think Smart, Dress Smart, Read Every Day.” At other times it listed the date and times of school meetings and events. Surprisingly, the marquee did not always have the dates and times of important meetings like School Site Council (SSC) and the English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC). During my time at Orange Elementary, all of the messages were exclusively in English. Several of the connected mothers told me that they looked at the marquee frequently to get information about upcoming events. On the other hand, none of the detached mothers told me that they used the marquee for information.

The school may have set its “official” start times, but families had their own schedules and routines, and some students began to arrive much earlier than the school wanted while others arrived much later than the school would have liked. The ingress of students started as a trickle each morning and then slowly increased until the campus was filled with students leaving the last remaining spaces for the few stragglers who completed the ranks as tardies. I was told that the doors of the school did not open until 7:30 AM, but I always tried to arrive by 7:00 AM because I was curious to see how early students, and parents, would begin arriving and what they would do before they were allowed on campus. I was able to observe what took place at Orange Elementary in the morning under a variety of weather conditions, including everything from warm and sunny to cold and rainy.

The first pattern I observed during the ingress of students was the distinct behaviors that took place in front of the school from those that occurred on campus in back of the school. While the interactions between parents and their children will be described in depth later in this chapter, suffice to say that the behaviors of those waiting for the main gate to open each morning was marked by minimal interaction. Transitioning to the back of the school was almost like entering a different world from the front with several notable commonalities that I will address. With the exception of the first few minutes after the gate was opened, the first thing I noticed when I entered the campus through the front gate was the noise of children talking together and mothers talking to one another, their voices echoing off the roof of the walkway. It was almost as if by going through the gate the spell of silence that was so prominent in the front of the school was broken.

Orange Elementary is an open campus in the morning, meaning anyone can enter the school grounds. Each school in the district sets its own standard on morning ingress procedures. Some allow parents on campus and others do not. Several principals in the district work hard to keep parents off of their campuses in the morning. Mrs. Noche is the exact opposite. She welcomes parents on campus and does whatever she can to make them feel comfortable and at ease. She explained to parents the simple procedures for the morning open campus at Back-to-School Night. “You can walk them to the line, but please remain a little ways back. Smaller siblings are not to play on the playground.”

Access to the playground did not begin until after the first bell rang at 7:45 AM. Before that time, students either went to the cafeteria to eat or waited alone or with friends until they were granted access to the playground (no students were allowed inside the cafeteria unless they ate breakfast). Parents also lined the hallway leading to the cafeteria with a concentration of mothers at the entrance, all waiting for the first bell and the student exodus from the building to the playground.

As the first bell rang, students and parents alike made their way across campus to the playground that was located on the far western side of the campus for a few minutes of recreation or conversation before the start of the school day. Almost all of the students crossed the campus using the sidewalk. I occasionally heard the cafeteria manager yell to one of the students, “Walk! Don’t run.” After the student complied, she followed up with “Thank you!” She then would look at me and we would both laugh, as if to mutually acknowledge that there were always a few kids who just needed a little reminder to stay on the straight and narrow.

The bell system provided a highly effective non-verbal clue that impacted everyone’s behavior. The five minute warning bell at 7:55 AM resulted in an immediate change in student and adult activity as well as a change in pace. The duty aides immediately blew their whistles. This was the signal for playing to end and lining up to begin. There was a specially designated line for each classroom. The students lined up in these areas during the first bell and were picked up by their teachers at the second bell. The youngest students formed their lines the quickest, many students having foregone play altogether to ensure their spots near the front of the line. Older students, especially boys, first ran to the drinking fountain and then sauntered slowly over to their lines. Students who were just arriving accelerated their pace and made their way directly to their classroom lines. Many parents waited in the hallways near the doors and windows of the classroom. Other parents were in the grassy areas looking towards the student lines. Still other parents lined up along the walls just a few feet from where the classroom lines were forming.

As the 8:00 bell rang, many teachers were already in place and lines of students began to move towards their classrooms. Some followed their teachers while other lines were led by a student as the teacher took her place at the end of the line. As the students passed their parents, some mothers kissed their children and gave a final farewell. I always observed a few mothers whispering to their children, and only separated themselves from the lines as the students entered the classroom.

Like clockwork, parents began to leave after they saw their children enter the classroom. Some of the children waved goodbye as they entered their classroom while others just seemed to ignore the fact that their parents were there. After the last of the students entered their classroom, all of the parents made their way out the main gate. Mrs.

Noche informed me that parents were expected to leave as soon as the students were in their classrooms. Parents seemed to comply with this request. No one stayed in the playground area or along the hallways. The only exception to this was on Thursdays when a dozen or so mothers would make their way to the resource room to do volunteer work for the teachers.

While there were differences between the morning arrival and the afternoon dismissal, there also were some striking similarities. To begin with, unlike the open campus in the morning, the campus was closed to parents during dismissal. All parental access to the campus was supposed to be controlled by the school's office. The result was a concentration of parents on the lawns and along the sidewalks and fences of the school. Even though the dismissal times were staggered, a large number of parents arrived early and then simply waiting for their children to arrive after the dismissal bells rang.

The kindergarten classes were the first to be dismissed at 1:45 PM. They were not released through the main gate to the front yard; rather they were led by their teachers into a relatively new dismissal area that consisted of a large fenced in area between the north parking lot and the front yard of the school, directly in front of the resource room. The entire length of the fence was always lined with parents looking in to where their children would be dismissed. The largest number of parents was always bunched up around the dismissal gate of the fenced in area. The main gate was closed and locked so that all students were forced into this fenced in area and were required to exit through the dismissal gate.

The dismissal gate opened directly onto the sidewalk in front of the school that was immediately alongside the road, controlling the adults who had access to the children and removing the opportunity for students to run out into the street. These measures, however, did not actually keep all adults off the campus. Right before the first SSC meeting on October 15, 2008, I met a mother outside the resource room in the restricted dismissal area. I asked her about the fenced area. She told me that she liked it because it kept the students safe. She explained that the principal had been very clear that parents were not to enter the fenced in area and that there was an aide monitoring the dismissal gate. She did not seem too concerned that neither the fence nor the aide was able to keep her off the campus. She emphasized that only parents who were given the signal to enter by teachers were allowed to be in the fenced in area. She also told me that a mother could enter at times if she was able to convince the "gatekeeper" that she had a valid reason to approach a teacher unsolicited.

In addition to the safety concern at the dismissal gate, and the fact that neither the fence nor the aide was able to keep everyone out of the dismissal area, another unintended consequence of the dismissal procedure was the barrier created between parents and teachers. As the mother above explained to me and Mrs. Noche confirmed, parents were allowed to enter the dismissal area with the consent of the teacher. However, what was apparently possible did not appear to be likely. The reality was that I only saw two or three teachers ever talking to parents in this area, usually kindergarten teachers. The majority of the teachers simply dropped their students off and went back on to the campus, never giving the parents a chance to signal them. I noticed that most teachers dropped their classes off almost as far away from the fence and gate as possible. The result was a large gap (30+ feet) between where the teachers dropped off their students and where the parents were standing along the other side of the fence. The amount of time teachers spent in this dismissal area seemed to decrease as the grade level increased (i.e., the kindergarten and first grade teachers were visible much longer than the upper grade teachers). In fact, some of the upper grade teachers did not even make it to the dismissal area; they just sent the students on ahead. Upper grade students were allowed to leave the dismissal area without being picked up by a parent. Several of the parents and teachers I spoke to expressed concern about the physical divide that had been created by the new dismissal area and its impact on the frequency of parent-teacher interactions.

Custodial Responsibilities of Parents at the School

While not all safety concerns, like the one created by the exit gate being located too close to the street, were addressed by parents, parents did assume many other custodial responsibilities, some collectively and others individually. For example, as was mentioned previously, Orange Elementary is an open campus in the morning. This policy did not seem to be a problem at this campus even though there was never any official supervision at the main gate. While teachers did frequent the halls, coming and going to their classrooms, there certainly was no guarantee that an objectionable individual had not entered the campus. Parents were basically self-policing, and Mrs. Noche felt comfortable with this practice. It was precisely this self-policing by parents that caused me concern when I first arrived on campus. I did all that I could to ensure that I was seen as someone who belonged rather than a person who raised suspicion.

The need for self-policing of adults was extended to students on the playground before the start of the school day. As the students made their way to the playground, the duty aides followed them, making the mental transition from cafeteria aide (keeping the students clean) to playground aide (keeping the students safe). Two aides were assigned to watch what would eventually grow to over 500 students. One of the aides told me that she never had any problems with kids getting in trouble. Chuckling she continued, “because I have the little ones.” She added that there were not a lot of problems on either side, because “I’m the enforcer.”

It may have been true that she was the “enforcer” and that the students were basically well-behaved, but for some parents, two adults assigned to look after 500 students was not a reassuring ratio if something were to go wrong. A number of parents chose to watch over their own children, much like they would do at the park. This worked well with the principal’s open campus policy. There were always 20 to 30 parents standing around the edge of the playground and in the hallways near the playground. Some parents were there to make sure that no one bullied their children while others were there to keep their kids from becoming bullies.

I spoke to one mother on November 19, 2008, who I saw looking out at the mass of students, keeping an eye on her own son. I asked her, “¿Usted viene todos los días?” (Do you come here every day?) She told me yes as her son ran up to her and said, “Mamá, me hacen mentiras.” (Mom, they’re telling lies about me.). (Note: This is not an exact translation, but the boy had special needs and he did not speak Spanish or English well). His mom did not say anything. I asked him, "¿Mentiras de qué? (Lies about what?) He repeated the phrase again and I asked him in English, "What do you mean?" I gathered that some other students were saying that he did not wait his turn in line for the tether ball which he claimed was a lie.

After her son ran back out on the playground, I asked her, ¿Y qué pasa todos los días? ¿Los niños se comportan bien?" (What happens here every day? Are the children well behaved?) She replied, "Algunos niños dicen grocerías y tratan mal a mi hijo." (Some students say bad things and treat my son poorly.) She continued, "Por eso vengo todos los días." (That's why I come here every day.) She wished that there were more duty aides.

I approached another woman, and, after introducing myself, I asked her why she was there. She told me that she had a granddaughter in the fourth grade. She said she came to school every day just to make sure that "todo va bien" (everything goes well). This Spanish speaking mother and grandmother would not be classified as being closely connected to the school even though they were there every morning looking after their children. I never saw them attend any of the official meetings. Yet, they had developed practices that they felt would help to ensure the success, or at least the wellbeing, of their own children before school began.

These custodial responsibilities were not, however, limited to activities taking place on school grounds. Directly in front of the school, there is an area marked in red labeled "No Stopping." On either side of the red zone is a green zone for immediate unloading. Both zones were used and no one appeared to heed any of the markings. When parents dropped off their children in the street, most used the school side, but both sides were used. Students dropped off at the far side of the street just run across the street between passing cars. There is no crosswalk directly in front of the school. Therefore, students and parents trying to cross the street illegally was one the school's biggest safety concerns during both ingress and egress times. The principal mentioned to me on several occasions that she was concerned that students would be hit by cars. She gave me several examples of near misses and how she had to yell to get the attention of the students. At Back-to-School Night, she told parents, "No sé si me parezco loca (I don't know if I seem crazy), but the other day I was yelling, 'No, no,' because I saw individuals calling their kids to cross the street. Children were ready to cross the street with cars coming." She went on to say that too many parents are parking in the bus zone. She warned that officers would be coming to give out tickets. These concerns did not, however, result in any school personnel being assigned to monitor the front of the school.

It was actually a parent who did something to make the area safer. Elena Rodas (C), who was introduced in chapter four, took the warning to heart and observed the danger first hand. Almost every morning, she could be seen volunteering in front of the school with a fluorescent orange vest on and a loud whistle. Elena made way for the buses by directing cars out of the red zone. Not all of the drivers appreciated her efforts at keeping the area safe, but she told me that she was doing it "para los niños" (for the children). Elena took charge when she saw a need. She did not need to be asked nor did she ever ask for pay or recognition.

As in the morning, there was no certificated supervision in front of the school at the end of the day either. The duty aide in charge of the dismissal gate was the only paid school staff for the entire area. This seemed to be working for the school because I never observed or heard about any problems between students or parents.

Perhaps, the only exception to this trouble-free zone was the traffic situation, especially along the street in the red zone that was reserved for buses. The solution to this problem was also the same as in the morning: Elena Rodas (C). While not quite as consistent with her presence in the afternoon, Elena knew the rules, she had her fluorescent vest, and she was determined to keep students safe and make room for the school buses to park. One afternoon, Elena explained to me that the special education students were allowed to exit through the main gate so that they could easily load the bus without getting lost in the crowd in front of the dismissal gate. As we waited for the special education students to be dismissed, she told me that the parents did not want to follow the rules as she pointed to the traffic jam in front of the school, surrounding the special education bus. Elena recognized that some parents did not like her telling them where to park. She told me of several instances when drivers would yell at her, becoming infuriated when she started to write down their license plate numbers. Elena also told me that she had thick skin and was not deterred since she was doing it for the children. It seems that people, like Elena, become more emboldened to take actions when they are doing it on behalf of others, especially children.

Interpersonal Interactions

The school campus was the social world that provided a focal point for observing interactions between parents and other key members of the school community. The three categories of interpersonal interactions of import for this study that will be described below are parent-child, parent-parent, and parent-staff.

Parent-Child

Observations and conversations with parents during the ingress and egress of students afforded me the chance to observe multiple interactions between parents and their children albeit in a limited place and time. Throughout my time at Orange Elementary, I paid particular attention to the interaction between parents and their children. I was initially surprised by the number of mothers who I observed walking with their children to school in silence. My original assumption was that I would see most mothers interacting with their children as they spent time together on the way to the school, giving “consejos” or advice and preparing the minds of their children for the day. While I did observe this from time to time, I was intrigued by the lack of communication taking place between the mothers and their children morning after morning. I rarely observed any adult holding a conversation with a student. Even when I observed students talking to each other, the mothers were either in front or behind and they were not saying anything to their children.

Several good examples of this took place on October 9, 2008. The first was a younger girl who appeared to be in second or third grade walking behind her mother who was pushing a stroller. They never said anything to each other as they approached the school. When they arrived at the main gate, they stopped about 15 feet from where the other students had gathered. They still did not interact, but rather watched the other students who were waiting in silence. Another example occurred after the gate had already opened. One mother was pushing a stroller while her kindergarten or first grade daughter walked behind her. When the mother eventually looked back, she realized that her daughter lagged more than 30 feet behind her. She signaled to her, and the girl ran to join her as they made the turn onto the campus and the front gate.

I observed many mothers pushing strollers, accompanied by one to three additional children who were walking either behind them or in front of them. I noticed that nearly half of the mothers never looked back to see if their children who were following them were still there. In addition to being an obvious safety concern, this also seemed to signal a communication problem. For these mothers, the intent was to physically usher their children to school. I did not notice a difference between the mothers who I categorized as connected and those who were detached.

The one consistent exception to this pattern was the interactions I observed between fathers and children. While not nearly as numerous as mothers, I regularly noticed fathers, and even some grandfathers, walking to school with their children. On December 4, 2008, I saw a father walking up the street holding his son's hand—he looked to be a first or second grader. The little boy was saying something to him and the father appeared to be listening intently. He looked down occasionally and said something to his son and the little boy just kept on talking.

Another noticeable difference between mothers and fathers was the position of the children in relation to the adult. I never saw any children walking behind their fathers. Fathers were often seen holding their child’s hand, girl or boy. As with the mothers, however, I did not see a lot of them talking to their children up until the point when they said goodbye. While I noticed many instances of students leaving their mothers without even a word or a wave, I did not observe the same with any of the fathers. Every father I observed said something as they parted, several even gave a kiss.

There were some mothers who did act as I had expected. One morning, I observed at least three examples of mothers approaching the school holding their child’s hand (two girls and one boy). While most engaged in little or no talking, one mother and daughter (perhaps kindergarten or first grade) were talking back and forth. They caught my attention primarily because it was so uncommon to see that kind of interaction. At the five-minute warning bell, I heard one boy tell his mother in Spanish. “Ya tengo que irme.” (I’ve got to go.) I heard his mother reply, “Pórtate bien” (Behave). This is the type of last minute “consejo” I had expected to hear much more frequently than I did.

On campus one morning, after the final bell rang to start the school day, I noticed one mother talking to her second or third grade son in English. He was not paying any attention to her and was running around. He did not appear to want to go line up. She eventually convinced him to join his class where he continued with his horseplay in line. The teacher walked over to him and he finally stopped and stood appropriately in line. This mother was not there to protect her son from others. She was there to do what she could to get him to behave. She was not very successful. The teacher appeared to wield more authority over her son than she did.

There are several patterns here that appear to be guiding parent behavior during the morning at Orange Elementary. First, verbal interactions between children and their parents are minimal. Next, fathers, when present, have somewhat more interactions with their children on average than mothers. Furthermore, the gender of the student did not seem to affect the amount of interaction. Mornings also did not reveal a significant difference between the kinds of interaction based on the age of the students except for fathers who appeared more affectionate with younger children. For the most part, these parents demonstrated their love for their children and the value they placed on education by simply being present. Few routinely engaged in any more than that at the school.

With few exceptions, this scarcity of interactions between parents and their children was also observed at dismissal. One advantage of the clear demarcation between school space and parent/family space for me as a researcher was the ability to examine the transition between the two with minimal overlap. For some parents, the fence seemed to enhance the feelings of excitement over their reunion. When they saw their child, especially those in kindergarten, they would begin to wave excitedly. As the first graders began to exit the school, many of them actually seemed more excited to see their parents than the parents did to see them. I also observed students who, after reuniting with a parent, would look back and yell to their teachers, “Goodbye, Miss Gonzalez,” and then wave with the same enthusiasm I had observed when they first saw their parents several minutes earlier. It seems as though the barrier of the fence changed one’s perspective significantly. Physically, the students were only a few feet from either parents or teachers. Psychologically, the fence created a divide between those on the inside and those on the outside of the school. This excitement on the part of the younger students also revealed how much they cared about their teachers. They were not thrilled to finally get away from them; rather, they were already missing them even though they had just left.

Not all parents, however, demonstrated the same degree of enthusiasm about being reunited with their child. For some, the adult interactions eclipsed the potential joy over the moment of first contact. Some students exited the gate to join their mothers who were talking to other mothers. I noticed students that tried to show their mothers a paper or a book, but the mothers did not even acknowledge their children; they just kept talking to each other. Once I observed this scenario play out when, after several moments of being pestered, the mother took the papers from her son without saying a word to him and just kept talking to the other mother. I also observed one mother who, after ending her extended conversation with another mother, simply took her daughter’s hand and began to walk away without either of them saying anything to each other.

In fact, as was the case in the morning, the majority of the children and parents did not talk to each other at all. After the initial greeting, I observed children either running ahead of their parents or walking next to them silently. The habit of limited verbal interaction between parents and their children was not just a pattern in the mornings, but in the afternoons as well. Most parents appeared to defer to the practice of fulfilling their duties by simply being present to pick up their children from school.

One significant exception that I observed to the practiced lack of interaction between parents and their children took place at the end of the official school day and concerned the issue of food. Each afternoon, as the final upper grade students were leaving the dismissal area, the crowd would slowly dissipate. However, a large number of students, perhaps 100, did not leave through the gate but rather formed groups of 20-25 students that were then picked up by their after school program group leaders. It was right about this time that I noticed that several mothers would pass food through the fence to their children, usually with little or no verbal exchange between them. Even though the after-school program provided students with snacks, some Mexican immigrant mothers insisted on providing their children with a snack from home.[1] Many of the mothers I observed doing this were not ones that I recognized from any of the school's meetings that I attended. Their behavior, however, is an example of the lengths to which they are willing to go to help their children become successful. These mothers were involved in the life and education of their children even if they did not volunteer at school or attend school meetings. Clearly, some mothers who were not connected to the school in formal ways are nonetheless connected to the school in many informal ways.

Parent-Parent

As I demonstrate above, in a number of instances, the interactions that parents had with one another had a significant impact on the kinds of interactions that took place between parents and their children. Two types of parent groupings emerged from my data. Each group engaged in a distinct set of practices. The majority were what I would call “loners” while the rest were the “social butterflies.”

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[1] This is something that I have observed quite often with students who are in the after school program at the school where I work. Even when I explain that the program offers them a nutritious snack, they always smile and tell me that he/she prefers "la comida de casa" (food from home). I am quite sure that my mother would have told me to eat the snack and be happy or else wait until I got home to eat.

In the morning, the loners rarely interacted with other parents. Some distributed themselves along the hallway to the cafeteria while others made their way to the hallways that led to their child’s classroom. A few had spots that they occupied under a tree or along the edge of the playground area. All of the fathers, unless they were with their wife, were loners. By loner, I do not mean to imply antisocial. I spoke to many of these loners and all of them were friendly, or at the very least civil, and willing to share information with me. The fathers, in particular, seemed most comfortable talking to me and were very interested to hear about what I was doing at the school.

While not all mothers were social butterflies, all of the social butterflies were mothers. Social butterflies could be found anywhere that they happened upon a friend, but they primarily spent the 40 minutes before the final bell in one of three areas. The largest concentration of mothers was just outside of the back entrance to the cafeteria. There was a large covered area that allowed them to gather regardless of the weather as well as keep an eye out for their children when they were allowed to exit the cafeteria at 7:45 AM. Mothers were not allowed to enter the cafeteria. Several of the connected mothers could be found in this area as well as a number of detached mothers who may never have attended any meetings or school events, but they were always there to make sure that their children made it to class safely.

The second area was just inside the gate at the widest part of the convergence of several sidewalks. This vantage point allowed them to see everyone entering the campus through the gate or the front office as well as being right alongside of the door to the principal’s office. I never noticed any of the connected mothers occupying this location, but I did see many of the mothers and grandmothers who were socially close to the principal stand there. While I rarely saw the principal outside during my morning observations, when I did, it was in this area, near her office and the front gate.

The final area was an uncovered spot that had several park benches located just to the right of the entrance to the school in the opposite direction of the cafeteria. It was the area closest to the resource room which also doubled as the parent volunteer room. It was here that five or six of the connected mothers, whom I eventually interviewed, tended to congregate.

I observed similar groupings during the egress of students at the end of the day. As in the mornings, the adults were primarily women, mostly mothers and a few grandmothers. There were always men in the crowd, but I estimated that they made up less than 10% of the whole. The clearest difference in behavior between the men and the women was their groupings. All the men were alone or with younger children. As in the morning, I never observed any men talking to other men or any women for that matter. There was always one or two of them sitting or laying on the grass under the large Eucalyptus tree as if they were at a park. Nearly three quarters of the mothers, on the other hand, were talking with other mothers. It seems as though the vast majority of mothers had been transformed into social butterflies. Like the men, many had younger children with them and there were always more than a dozen strollers by the time the students started coming out of the school.

While parent-child interactions were extremely limited at all times and places, interactions between mothers were more common and seemed to increase as the total number of people at the site increased and the time approached the start of school. The one exception to this was that I never observed fathers interacting with other fathers or mothers except in several instances when couples walked their child to school together. Except for the social butterflies, the strategy of action for vast majority of the parents consisted of passive observations of their children and the surroundings. They did not talk or interact with anyone. Once again, the behaviors of connected and detached mothers demonstrate that they have a great deal in common. It is only in several small ways, as we will see below, that these mothers are distinguishable from one another.

Parent-Staff

The interactions between parents and members of the school staff were even more limited than the parent-child and parent-parent interactions described above. With few exceptions, there was a pattern of disconnectedness between the teachers and the parents, including the mothers who were the most connected to the school overall. Parents and staff appeared to avoid one another, at best, exchanging brief, cordial greetings.

When I first started observing, I thought that the large number of parents who lined the hallways and stood alongside the doors to classrooms wanted to speak with a teacher. It did not take long for me to realize that they did not. Most parents would, at best, only greet a teacher as she passed by. Primarily, parents were just waiting for their child to enter the classroom and begin the day.

On one occasion, I saw a mother talking to one of the teachers who was standing at the door watching her students enter the classroom. The conversation did not end between the two until at least 15 seconds had passed since the last student had entered the classroom. They both smiled as they parted. This exchange was unusual and a violation of the open campus procedures. In fact, other than the occasional polite “Good morning,” I rarely observed any teachers talking with parents. Most teachers were not out and about until the five-minute warning bell rang. They then came out quickly from the teacher’s lounge or their classrooms on their way to the area where the classes lined-up. I was told that parents were allowed to talk to teachers informally in the mornings, but I rarely saw this occur during my morning observations.

These limited interactions between parents and staff are in stark contrast to the magnanimous personality of the principal. While the teachers have a great deal of influence over the kinds of interactions that take place between the parents of students in their class on any given year, it is the principal who sets the tone and policy for parent involvement at the school in general. In order to understand the behaviors of parents at a given school, we must also understand how these behaviors develop in relation to those behaviors of the principal. Before and after official meetings and school events, Mrs. Noche always greeted parents warmly. “Good morning!” “Thank you for coming.” “It is so good to see you.” In addition to the warm tone in her voice, she was shaking hands, patting people on the back, and giving hugs to some of the mothers. Mrs. Noche easily filled the role of host. As a Latina, she knew the culture of her families intimately and was completely at ease around everyone in that community. Her affectionate personality and sociable style when dealing with individuals on a personal level characterized a pattern of behavior that was repeated over and over again throughout this study. I never observed even the slightest variation from this when she was dealing one-on-one with people. As we will see, however, she was unable to transfer this strategy of action to her stage persona when speaking to a large group.

Mrs. Noche's interaction with parents was not limited to cordial greeting or robust handshake. An example of her interpersonal familiarity with the parents at her school occurred when I met the SSC chairperson, Margarita Bermejo, for the first time. When I asked Margarita how she got interested in serving on the SSC, she told me that she had attended all of the meetings during the previous year. She told me that she liked coming because Mrs. Noche used to be her second grade teacher. Mrs. Noche then recounted how she also taught all of her older siblings. Mrs. Noche continued by telling me that her mother was a wonderful person and very religious. Adding, she "prays for me every day." Mrs. Noche always had a story behind each and every person and event that she enjoyed sharing with me or anyone else who would listen. Her background knowledge of the school, community, and individuals within the school was amazing. She once told me with a laugh that she was very "metiche" (meaning nosey or always in the middle of things).

Not all non-classroom certificated personnel had Mrs. Noche's ability to make parents feel welcomed. The resource teacher, Jeanette Gabela, was the principal's chief assistant. Staff and parents alike knew that she was the one in charge when the principal was not available. She, too, would always greet parents and smile as she entered and passed by them before and after meetings. Unlike the principal, however, I did not notice Mrs. Gabela shake anyone's hand or give out any hugs. Even though she, too, was a second generation Latina like Mrs. Noche, her pattern of interacting with parents, while friendly, was not as warm. She conducted herself in a professional manner that at times might have appeared to be a little standoffish.

Meetings and Events

In addition to the constraints placed on parent behaviors as a result of both the physical structures of the campus and the partitioning of time within the school day, there were also a number of organizational structures and rituals in the form of meetings and events that required the time and attention of parents. However, unlike the nearly universal compliance with the rules governing the ingress and egress of students, school meetings and events were met with varying degrees of compliance by the school community. Furthermore, while meetings and events were primarily designed for the same group of stakeholders, namely parents and school personnel, school meetings were much more formal due to legal ramifications, and events were informal and able to focus on either educational or social concerns.

There has always been the notion of accountability in public education. However, with No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), the bureaucracy in public education has increased to the point that the federal government now dictates not only minimum levels of student achievement at the local level, but also the expectations for stakeholder interactions. Accountability has become more than just an important element within the public school system; it has become a focal point.

In response to these mandates from both state and federal governments, Rancho Verde Unified School district (RVUSD) requires all schools within the district to have a minimum of 12 official meetings each year: the Annual Title I meeting, the Annual English Language Learner (ELL) meeting, five English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC) meetings, and five School Site Council (SSC) meetings. I refer to them as official because they are not optional and physical documents must be maintained as proof of the meeting. In addition to these official meetings, there are also a number of other gatherings or events that a school is expected to hold which are open to the community at large. I describe these events as either social or educational. Social events are designed to either provide parents and teachers a chance to get to know one another better in a non- or less-intimidating environment, or to provide an experience that is pleasurable or even entertaining. Educational events are designed as way for the school to teach parents how to extend learning opportunities to the home setting.

In this section, I will analyze the response of parents to requests by the school to attend school meetings and events as well as the participation of both parents and staff at these gatherings. I will show that parents utilize a completely different set of strategies of action for social events than for educational events and official meetings. Additionally, what will become eminently clear is that parents attend social events in mass with little or no encouragement from the school, while even when raffle prizes are offered, the turnout at an educational events and official meetings is dismal in comparison.

Responses to Requests for Attendance

Parents did not respond in the same way to all requests for participation in school meetings and events. Flyers to parents, agendas, a posting on the marquee, and refreshments are often referred to in the literature as minimal elements for any gathering that hopes to involve parents. Orange Elementary missed two and sometimes three of these basic elements. Yet the response of parents to a request by the school to attend a meeting or event did not necessarily depend on any of these items. There was widespread acceptance by parents to attend certain meetings and events, even when poorly promoted, while I observed widespread rejection of other requests that had been given more attention from the school.

Widespread acceptance

There were two events at Orange Elementary that filled the auditorium to capacity, all of which I would categorize as social events. They were Back-to-School Night and both evenings of the Winter Program. While parent participation by all who were invited was perhaps not universal, hundreds of parents attended each of these social events. In comparison, the only official meetings to have more than 80 in attendance were the annual meetings for Title I and English Language Learners (ELL).

Back-to-School Night was the first major school event of the year. It is an annual event that allows parents an opportunity to come to the school and meet with the principal and teachers. This event usually begins in the cafeteria with a presentation by the principal and may or may not include an introduction of all teachers and staff to the parents. The initial kick-off is then followed by several classroom sessions where individual teachers or grade levels present information to parents on such topics as core subjects, textbooks, homework, grading, classroom rules, discipline policy, field trips, and other related grade level information.

While parents are allowed to ask questions and speak directly with the teacher before and after each session, teachers are discouraged from allowing this time to be monopolized by just a few parents or to become an individual conference time. This is a time for parents to meet their child's new teacher and get an overview of what to expect in the coming year. Several sessions are offered so that parents with more than one child at the school get the opportunity to meet all of their children's teachers. While sign-in sheets are not generated at a school wide level, overall teachers reported that more than half their parents attended at least one of their two sessions.

I have chosen to classify Back-to-School Night as social rather than educational because, even though there are educational elements taking place throughout the evening (especially during the teacher's presentation), the overall character and mood of the event is festive and filled with excitement. Physical signs of welcome at Back-to-School Night were also punctuated by positive informal interactions between teachers and parents even before the start of the event. I was able to observe the following as a first grade teacher, Angela Greer, a non-Latina white woman in her early sixties, was approaching the front office.

> Ms. Greer sees a father who she knows from a previous year. She asks him in Spanish, "¿Cómo va todo este año?" (How is everything going this year?) The father responds, "Bien, bien." (Good, good.) She then asks him, "¿En qué grado está?" (What grade is she in?) The father replies, "Tercero." (Third). The teacher then says, "Qué bueno. Pues con permiso." (How nice. Well, if you'll excuse me)

> The father seemed very pleased to be greeted by the teacher. He smiled broadly. (FN: 9/11/08)

This is only one example of the numerous positive interactions that I observed between teachers and parents throughout the evening. Even when I was not able to hear the words that were spoken, the smiles on faces, often accompanied by sounds of laughter, revealed the positive nature of the interactions.

While a case might be made to not include Back-to-School Night under the heading of social event, the same would not be true for the school's Winter Programs. For 30 minutes each evening on December 10 and 11, 2008 there were more parents in the cafeteria than I had ever seen, and there was not even a hint of anything educational except for the obvious performing arts experience enjoyed by those participating in the production. The night was dedicated to entertainment and the response was remarkable.

Unlike the response of parents to the other evening events at the school, including the slow yet eventually large turnout for Back-to-School Night, the parents were out in force and they were out early for the winter programs. Even though I arrived 45 minutes early each evening, there was already a line to enter the cafeteria that had formed that would eventually extend out of sight into the darkness of the evening. In addition to the notable size of the crowds, they were also noticeably well-mannered. The clear message from parents to schools is that this type of event is very important to parents.

The massive turnout was not the result of any special advertising or promotion. It was not listed on the school's annual calendar and the school did not send home a flyer announcing the event. The only school wide effort to make the event known was the message on the marquee which read:

Holiday Program
12/10 Pre-school & Kinder
12/11 First & Second
6-7PM

Teachers, naturally, were also responsible for their own promotion of the event within their classrooms. The winter programs seemed to be something that appealed to both parents and teachers.

The large turnout is understandable when one considers that connected and detached mothers alike told me vivid stories of the programs and special events that they fondly remembered about their schools in Mexico. They described in great detail the clothes and the food at these events. While several mentioned the challenges presented by the cost of these events, all of them remembered participating, even if sacrifices had to be made. Many of the mothers I interviewed lamented that there were not more such events here in the U.S.

While nowhere near the turnout of these three events, the only official meetings to warrant the classification of widespread acceptance were the annual Title I and ELL meetings with nearly 80 in attendance. Within the first 30 days of a new academic year, every school that receives Title I funds and/or has more than 21 English Language Learners (ELL) is required to hold an annual meeting to inform parents of their rights and participation in these programs. The five subsequent SSC meetings loosely correspond to the annual Title I meeting while the five ELAC meetings are the counterpart to the Annual ELL meeting, all of which will be discussed under widespread rejection. Orange Elementary received Title I funding and had over 260 ELL students at the start of the 2008-09 school year and therefore was required to hold both meetings.

Both of these annual meetings had basically the same parents in attendance at each of them because the meetings were held back-to-back. I was quite impressed with the large turnout for a set of morning meetings. All but one of the ten connected mothers in my study attended these meetings. Several parents commented that they attended these meetings because they were the first meetings of the year. Others said that they received an automated call from the principal telling them about the meeting and felt that they had to attend.

However, it was not until the meetings ended that I discovered an additional reason for the large turnout. As parents were beginning to leave, I was caught off guard at first when one mother asked, “Who can sign our papers for attending a meeting?” It was not until that moment that I realized why so many parents had attended this meeting and where willing to stay for so long. The mother was referring to the requirement of parents with children in the one-to-one laptop program to volunteer at least 10 hours/year. If parents fulfilled the volunteer requirement, their child got to keep the laptop permanently. Attendance at meetings was an approved example of volunteering, and Orange Elementary had over 150 students in the program.

The requirement of the one-to-one laptop program is an example of a widely disseminated code that will receive further attention in chapter seven that seemed to be working to improve participation and connection with the school. What would happen if a school were to suggest or even require parents to volunteer or participate at school for 10 hours/year without giving them a laptop computer? Would they do the same for a certificate signed by the principal and presented in a special assembly attended by all the parents? Orange Elementary will soon find out just how much the one-to-one laptop requirement raised their participation rates in the coming year because due to the state's budget crisis, the district discontinued the Elementary program at the end of June 2009.

While the Annual ELL and Title I meetings were, in fact, the highest attended official meetings that I attended, as I waited for the doors to open with the rest of the parents outside the entrance to the cafeteria, I noticed that an even larger number of parents were leaving the campus. Since I did not see anyone at the front of the school encouraging them to attend the meetings that were about to start, I decided to stop several of them and ask if they planned on attending the meetings. One mother asked me, "¿De qué se trata la reunión?" (What is the meeting about?) I told her the title of the two meetings and a quick summary of each. She smiled, and told me, "Gracias. Voy a ver." (Thanks. I'll see.) She then looked at the parents going into the meeting, and promptly made her way down the school's sidewalk to the street. I did not see her later at the meeting. I stopped another mother with a baby stroller and asked her if she was going to attend the meetings. She said, "Gracias, pero no puedo hoy." (Thanks, but I can't today.)

Clearly, a majority of parents affiliated with the school chose not to attend the meetings. In addition to all of the flyers, automated phone calls, and marquee messages that the school had utilized to inform parents of the meetings, the large group of parents waiting to enter the cafeteria surely would have been a signal to anyone who had missed these messages that something was about to take place. The two mothers I spoke with were both polite and willing to answer my questions, but they were not interested in joining the other parents. The first mother seemed to have become so entrenched within her own world and habits of coming and going to school with minimal contact by school personnel that she genuinely may not have known about the meetings. On the other hand, she did not take the initiative to ask what was going on.

Widespread rejection

In contrast to the widespread acceptance of social events and the two official meetings held early in the year, the poor attendance by parents at the ELAC and SSC meetings as well at the educational events, namely the two literacy nights and the math night, seem to demonstrate a widespread rejection of the school's request for attendance at these gatherings. Widespread rejection does not mean rejection by all. It simply means that when less than 50 parents (and at times as few as five at SSC meetings) respond to a request for attendance at a school meeting or event with a student population of more than 500 that the request has been soundly rejected by the vast majority of the desired participants.

If the Annual ELL meeting is the taste of what the school is doing for ELLs, then ELAC is supposed to be the full meal. The school is required to hold five meetings annually in which to thoroughly explain, discuss, and, most importantly, generate parent advice for the SSC regarding ELLs at the school. None of the meetings had the kinds of numbers that were seen in the Annual ELL meeting and the attendance decreased as the year progressed.

The first ELAC meeting of the year had some problems right from the start. The meeting was scheduled on the school's master calendar to take place on the morning of October 15, 2008 but was unexpectedly postponed to October 16. Neither I nor several of the mothers I talked to about the meeting were aware of the change until we discovered that the doors to the cafeteria were locked on the day of the scheduled meeting. One of the connected mothers quickly inquired about the meeting in the front office and was informed of the abrupt change in date.

This minor bit of confusion is a marker for what is a pattern of failure by the school to comply with regulations as well as a failure of the state and district systems of accountability to account for it. Let me be clear from the beginning, the issue here is not the alteration of a meeting schedule. Understandably, official meeting dates are determined months in advance and must be modified occasionally to adjust for unforeseen situations. The problem here is threefold.

First, parents were not made aware of the change in advance. Parents as well as visitors, like myself, arrived on the scheduled date of the meeting only to find out at the last minute that the time we had set aside for the meeting was for not, and that we should return the next day. This action by the school provided parents, in particular those who were the most connected and involved, with a cultural experience that demonstrated that the school could not be trusted for accurate information, and that it did not value parents' time. It seemed as if the school was saying to us, "After all, if the meeting is not today, just come back tomorrow—and we do expect you to be here tomorrow." If this was an isolated event, then it might be quickly overlooked. However, for some, this might have served as a confirmation of previous negative experiences with this or some other school.

Second, the reason parents were caught off guard was because the school was out of compliance with district and state regulations. The Brown Act (SB 36 and 1140, AB

1426) states that agendas and meeting notices for all public meetings must be mailed or posted at least 72 hours in advance. I searched the premises for both postings and agendas but found none on either day. When I asked Mrs. Gabela, the resource teacher and Site Governance Facilitator (SGF), about this before the SSC meeting the previous day, she told me that they are “always posted” on the office windows and the cafeteria doors 72 hours before the meeting. Even as she told me this, there was nothing posted because I went and checked again. Later, Mrs. Noche also told me the same, adding, “We want to be in compliance.”

Third, this incident clearly shows that current compliance mechanisms at the district are less than effective. Both the principal and the SGF were aware of the Brown Act. They described it to me accurately. However, no one was monitoring to see that it was carried out. Of the eight official meetings I attended at Orange Elementary, I only found one agenda ever posted in the office window, ELAC #3 on 2-18-09, but it, too, was posted less than 24 hours in advance. In stark contrast to this compliance failure at the site was the exemplary paperwork that was sent to the multilingual office for their records. Written documents can be easily stored and monitored from an off-site district office. However, as we shall see, no one can monitor the accuracy of written documents from afar any better than they can monitor compliance of non-written actions like the Brown Act. This lack of compliance does little to foster open communication and transparency.

On the actual day of the first ELAC meeting, I approached several of the mothers that seemed to be connected with the school and had been waiting outside the cafeteria doors with me the day before. They told me that they had received the automated message the night before. They also told me that they were surprised that they had not received a flyer about the meeting. I also did not receive a copy of a flyer from the School Office Manger (SOM) who was collecting documents that were sent home with students for me. The official documents sent to the Multilingual Office, however, did contain a copy of a flyer in both Spanish and English that had supposedly been sent home. It is possible that the SOM forgot to save a copy of the flyer in my file and the children of the connected parents I spoke with may have forgotten to bring it home. However, as I suggest below, it may also be a sign of a pattern of document misrepresentation.

This incident also strengthens the finding that connected mothers have very different approaches to learning about meetings and staying connected to the school than others within the school community. The connected mothers I interviewed told me that they did not rely exclusively upon information that came from the school. They would communicate with one another via social networks, reminding and encouraging each other to attend the meetings. Several mentioned that they would also invite their neighbors who did not typically attend school activities, but they were seldom successful.

As I did before the two annual meetings above, I talked with parents I saw in front of the school before the start of the meeting to see what they knew about ELAC and if they intended on attending the meeting. Two mothers I met leaving the campus did not even know what “ELAC” meant. I explained to them, in Spanish, that it is an advisory committee for parents whose children are learning English. The fact that they were native

Spanish speakers meant that their children would have been labeled by the school as ELLs of some kind. Neither of them knew anything about the meeting. When I told them that it was open to all parents and that they could attend if they had the time, they both looked at each other and shook their heads no. One of them responded, “Hoy no puedo.” (I can’t today.) I did not see either of them at the meeting which actually took place the following day.

While arguably the most important meetings held at the site, the five SSC meetings also had the lowest attendance of any official meeting. SSC meetings are much broader in their scope than ELAC meetings and do not correlate as directly to the Annual Title I meetings as ELAC does to the Annual ELL meeting. The SSC is distinguished by the fact that it is the one and only decision-making council at a school site. The two primary functions of the committee are to develop and approve both the Single Plan for Students Achievement (SPSA), more commonly known as the School Plan, and the categorical budgets, which included Title I as well as all other state and federal categorical funding sources. At the elementary level, this voting power is to be equally divided between two parity groups: the school and the parents. Except for the principal who is a permanent member of the school parity group, all other members are elected by the group they represented for two-year terms. In addition to the principal, the school parity group has to have at least one classified or non-classroom teacher member, and a majority of teachers. This usually results in an SSC with 10 members; however, it can be larger if the other parameters all hold true.

Orange Elementary handled their SSC meetings quite differently than their ELAC meetings. Whereas the ELAC meetings were all held in the cafeteria, the SSC meetings were all held in the much smaller resource room. This of necessity limited the amount of people that could potentially attend an SSC meeting, which was never a problem as I was the only non-member to attend any of the meetings. This was in part due to the fact that while the ELAC meetings were highly promoted with flyers and automated phone messages, including the occasional reminder on the marquee, the SSC were only known by the members themselves. Technically the SSC meetings were open to everyone, but practically speaking, no one but members attended.

Additionally, while the school offered water, coffee, and either trail mix or donut holes to snack on at the first two SSC meetings, there were not any refreshments for the third meeting. Like babysitting, refreshments were an acceptable expense from Title I funds. I have found that most people, including myself, prefer meetings to offer at least a little something to eat; the better the refreshments, the greater the anticipation that exists for attending subsequent meetings. This is true when working with all volunteers, but it is even more so when working with volunteers whose culture places such an emphasis on food at gatherings. Failure to have adequate refreshments at their formal meetings was not a money issue, but a planning and implementation issue.

While Back-to-School Night is mandated by the district, and the Winter Program is all but mandated by the parents and tradition, educational events are optional and at the school's discretion. While the Family Literacy Nights and Family Math Night were school wide events and held at the same time as the successful social events listed above, the nominal parent turnout for these activities once again demonstrated the widespread rejection of the school's requests for participation in an event that the bilingual flyers described as, "Teachers will present reading (math) activities that will help you teach your child at home." Unlike the social events, the principal and teachers who hosted the event did offer raffle prizes. However, they clearly were not of sufficient interest to either the students or possibly the parents to entice them to attend. Furthermore, there was no food or beverages being offered or sold at these events.

While overall, the educational events were rejected by the school community, there was an interesting attempt at acceptance of the math night by one of the mothers who was a participant in my detached group of mothers. At around 6:25 PM, Laura Rodriguez (D) showed up at the classroom halfway through the teachers' presentation. On its face, a mother showing up late to a school event, even if she is usually detached from the school is hardly something remarkable. It was not until after the event that my assistant told me the intriguing story behind her arrival. When we first arrived and were talking with the connected mothers in the cafeteria, my assistant asked Celia Lemus (C) about her "cuñada" (sister-in-law), Laura Rodriguez (D). She immediately got on her cell phone and called Laura, telling her to come to the math night. The reason Laure arrived at 6:25 was because Celia gave her a specific invitation at 5:55 PM. The success at getting Laura to come to an educational event concurs with the research by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005, 1997) that parents respond positively to direct requests for involvement.

Unfortunately, Laura would also leave early. From the moment she arrived, her kids were completely out of control, running and screaming both inside and outside the classroom. This exemplifies one of the challenges facing mothers, especially detached mothers. Even when one does try to get connected after receiving a personal invitation from a trusted friend, her sister-in-law, Laura did not have a positive or productive experience because her children were so out of control that she could not focus. I wonder how much one or two negative experiences can impact the likelihood that a parent will attempt to get more connected with the school in the future.

Participation by Parents

Choosing to accept an invitation by the school to attend a meeting or event, even if that meeting was rejected by a majority of the other parents at the site, is only one strategy of action. Additional strategies of action are required to successfully traverse the meeting itself. While I am primarily interested in the way that Mexican immigrant mothers use their culture to make choices regarding lines of action available to them, I also realize that these choices are made within the larger social context of the school; and, therefore, requires some analysis of the behaviors of school personnel as well. In this section, I will analyze the strategies of action used by parents during their participation at official school meetings, and during social and educational events.

Official school meetings

Parents approached official school meetings and school events in patterned ways. For the most part, parents took two approaches to school meetings. The first was to listen intently to the speaker and the second was to avoid asking questions.

Time and time again, I observed the following pattern repeated at school meetings. Throughout the entire presentation, the vast majority of parents would either look at Mrs. Noche or the prepared handouts. Most adults never even looked at or acknowledged those around them.

Mothers with babies or toddlers, on the other hand, were often distracted by their own children. Even though the district encouraged schools to provide child care during parent meetings it was often difficult to get mothers to leave their children with strangers. When it was not offered, or at least not utilized, the sound of children could distract both mothers and other parents from paying close attention to what was being presented or discussed at the meeting. There were always a number of children under the age of four at ELAC meetings. The school did not provide childcare (or babysitting as it commonly called) for these children during any of the meeting. The result was a cacophony of sounds that varied throughout each meeting.

At several meetings, I observed Celia Lemus (C) constantly whispering to her toddler or redirecting his attention to several of his toys. I frequently heard jarring sounds as he banged his toys together or the vibration of wheels going back and forth on the table. For every 5-10 seconds that Celia looked at Mrs. Noche, she had to look back at her son for a similar length of time. The sound did not appear to bother those around them. I did not see anyone giving her dirty looks or asking her to keep her child quiet. At the time of the observation, I doubted that this mother would be able to grasp more than half of the information that was presented at the meeting. My suspicions were confirmed later when Celia told me that she always attended the meetings, but she missed out on a lot of the information because she had to keep an eye on her son.

The ability of parents to ignore, or at least accept, the constant noise and distraction of small children in meetings at first seemed to be almost universal. However, after hearing the views of several parents who attended the meetings, I discovered that the seemingly undistracted looks were simply masking their true feelings. For example, at the first ELAC, two boys, approximately two or three years of age, began running and pushing each other in the center of the cafeteria. No one got up or tried to stop them. After one of the boys went off on his own, I heard several mothers behind me say, “El niño puede quemarse con el café” (The child can get burned by the coffee). Another mother said, “No sé de quién es el niño” (I don’t know whose child that is). The boy continued to meander around the cafeteria until he bumped his head on a table bench and began crying loudly.

At the end of the meeting, Elena Rodas (C) came up to me and said that she did not like the noise level caused by the screaming children. She said that she was willing to attend the ELAC meeting at the nearby middle school and then take care of the children during the meetings at Orange Elementary. Elena told Mrs. Gabela of her plan. She asked if Mrs. Gabela could find at least one helper. Mrs. Gabela told her that she could use the resource room. After Mrs. Gabela left, Elena told me that not only was it distracting to have so many children running around, but it was also dangerous. She said that it would cost the district a lot of money if a child were to get hurt.

Throughout the meeting, Elena’s face never revealed her thoughts on the children’s behavior all around her. Like the majority of the parents I observed, she appeared to be focused on the speaker and did not seem to notice the commotion. This, of course, masked her true thoughts on what was taking place. Her offer at the end of the meeting to babysit these children, however noble it may have been, was somewhat problematic. According to the minutes of that very meeting, Elena was elected to be the ELAC co-chairperson and DELAC representative. Her positions made her presence at the meetings essential. Yet, here again, we see that for at least one parent, ELAC was about getting information, not about giving advice. Elena felt that she could just as easily attend the ELAC in a nearby school and obtain the same information.

Except for the sound of small children and several exceptional ELAC meetings that will be described below, there was little sound from the audience. After each agenda item, Mrs. Noche or Mrs. Gabela would ask if there were any questions, "¿Alguien tiene una pregunta?" Even though parents were listening, or at least appeared to be listening, they rarely asked any question or made any comments.

When I spoke with parents individually, they all acknowledged that it was important for students to ask questions in class. Connected and detached parents alike told me that they encouraged their children to ask questions in class. The cultural capacity was there, but the familiarity and ease needed to use the skill seemed to be lacking. Then again, a cynic might ask, "What on earth would I possibly want to ask about at this meeting?" No input was needed. There were no decisions to be made, and there was not even a request made for anyone to change his or her behavior. It would not be difficult to imagine someone thinking, "I have joined with you to ensure that the school is compliant. I've done my duty as a good parent. Can I leave now?"

Whenever a parent did pose a question, it was often off topic or inappropriate for the meeting. For example, at the end of the Annual Title I meeting, Mrs. Noche asked again if there were any questions. One mother asked about the teacher in her child's fifth grade classroom. Mrs. Noche briefly discussed how changes had to be made in the classroom arrangements due to the number of students who enrolled at each level. This question had nothing to do with the presentation that had just been given, but is a good example of the type of question that parents ask at meetings. It seems as though they are willing to sit through a meeting for an hour or more just to ask a question that has nothing to do with the meeting at hand or the issues being discussed.

As was discussed above, it is within the cultured capacities of parents to ask questions. This example expands upon that capacity to show that it appears to be most acceptable for parents to ask questions at the end of a meeting. This is probably due in large part to the fact that at the end of every official agenda is the line item: "Questions." Immigrant parents can hear principals and teachers ask if there are any questions as much as they like. However, they have learned that the best time to get one's question answered is when it appears officially written into the agenda.

The failure of parents to ask questions at meetings should not be taken to mean that they understood a presentation or agenda item. The best example of this is with regards to the Uniform Complaint Procedure (UCP). By law, the UCP must be presented at the first Annual Title I, Annual ELL, SSC, and ELAC meetings each year. The result is that some highly connected parents must actually sit through the same or similar type of presentation four times during the first month and a half of school every year. While the letter of the law was fulfilled at Orange Elementary, I found that none of the parents understood the UCP or could explain it to me. Additionally, the failure of school personnel to check for understanding in the same way they would for the students in their classes may demonstrate a lack of concern for parents obtaining a deep understanding of the content.

One of the most patterned behaviors of staff at formal meetings and events was to encourage parents to sign-in. This was not always the priority for parents. For example, at the annual Title I and ELL meetings, I counted nearly 80 parents in attendance at each meeting. The sign in sheets, however, only registered 74 parents at the first meeting and 43 at the second one. Furthermore, while I counted at least five fathers at both meetings, the sign-in sheets only document three fathers at the first meeting and one at the second. No father's name appeared on both sign-in sheets. This may be because both sets of sign-in sheets were set out at the beginning of the first meeting and some of the parents, particularly fathers, may not have realized that they were supposed to sign both sets of sheets. Most connected mothers would have been to enough meetings to realize what they needed to do when the school had back-to-back meetings so they signed both sheets while some less connected mothers and the men apparently did not. Additionally, while Mrs. Noche strongly encouraged parent to sign both sets of sheets at the beginning of the first meeting and the end of the second meeting, some parents may not have heard or recognized the importance for the school of having their names on both sign-in sheets. As far as the district was concerned, if you did not sign-in, you were not there.

This is an example of how the culture of accountability has had a direct impact on the behavior of school personnel. Mrs. Noche probably demonstrated more passion when talking about signing in than she did about any of the agenda items. In fact, the sign-in sheet is perhaps the most consistent features of both official meetings and school events.

This is also the first time that we have been able to see how the culture of accountability in the form of a sign-in sheet has affected the behavior of parents. While most recognize the custom of signing-in at a meeting (hence the 74 names on the Title I sign-in sheets), the importance of having to sign-in twice did not make sense to everyone. It should also be noted that the vast majority (80-90%) of the parents were Spanish-speaking. Language provides us with a clue that these are immigrant parents. They accepted the principal's invitation to connect with the school even if all of their actions did not comply with the needs of the district for accountability.

Yet getting parents to sign-in properly was not the only problem school staff encountered during parent meetings. Mrs. Gabela discovered that additional challenges could arise when she was asked by the principal to run the first ELAC meeting by herself. Almost immediately, the meeting did not go as planned. Mrs. Gabela announced, "La presidenta de ELAC está atrás." (The ELAC chairperson is in the back.) "Por favor, si quiere pasar aquí al frente." (Please, if you would like to come to the front.) The ELAC chairperson replied, "No," and laughed. The chairperson never went to the front and Mrs. Gabela did not ask again.

This episode exemplifies a common problem with leadership development at school sites. Schools are required to involve parents in the meetings and in the leadership of the school. However, as this example demonstrates, even when schools in poor, minority areas are able to convince a parent to participate in a meeting and even take the next step and become a named leader, that does not necessarily mean that they want the position or are prepared to fulfill the duties required of them. Additionally, the fact that the ELAC chairperson was not at the front from the very beginning, helping to organize and set up the meeting, is a clue as to how little ownership they have actually taken of the meeting. This may also reveal how little opportunity parents have been given to practice leadership roles and become confident in such a strategy of action. Then again, several parents told me that these are school meetings, and the school personnel (i.e., paid staff) are the ones responsible for running them. No one at Orange Elementary seemed to be fighting for a leadership position nor did they take pride in the position even after it was theirs. At the same time, the paid staff at Orange Elementary did not have a plan in place to develop parental leadership.

The parent leadership dilemma intensified later in the meeting when Mrs. Gabela announced, “Otra vez, tenemos que buscar un chairperson” (Once again, we need to find a chairperson). Annually, the ELAC must elect a chairperson, assistant chairperson, and secretary of the ELAC. As was made clear above, the person who eventually accepted the position did not always do so wholeheartedly. It was often just a symbol and/or a name that must be entered in the district/state paperwork in order for a school to be compliant. As we shall see, the difficulties in electing a chairperson and then getting that person to fulfill his or her duties were more similar than one might imagine.

According to the district's election policies, Mrs. Gabela incorrectly began the process by not asking for nominations. Instead, she directly asked one mother if she would be willing to do it. The mother responded, "No." Mrs. Gabela then gave a general request to everyone, asking if anyone was willing to do it or had any ideas as to who might be able to do it. There were no ideas and no suggestions.

Mrs. Gabela eventually asked last year's vice-chairperson if she was willing to be the chairperson. "Are you willing?" With little enthusiasm, the mother agreed with a lackluster, "OK." Mrs. Gabela responded, "Muchas gracias por ser dispuesta. ¿Cuál es tu appellido?" (Thank you for being willing. What is your last name?). It is interesting that the SGF did not even know the last name of the previous year's ELAC co-chairperson.

After writing down the information, Mrs. Gabela continued, "Ahora es DELAC." (Now it's DELAC.) "¿Quién fue el año pasado?" (Who was it last year?). Doris Silva (C) acknowledged that she was, but added, "Yo no he ido a las reuniones" (I haven't gone to the meetings). "Pasa aquí al frente" (Come up here to the front), Mrs. Gabela said to her. She clearly did not want to go to the front but eventually did. Doris was also a member of the SSC and, perhaps, the strongest parent leader at the school. As we will see later, she had very strong ideas about Orange Elementary and education in the U.S.

Doris explained to the committee, "No es mucha responsabilidad. Es nomás traer information a la escuela." (It's not a lot of responsibility. It's just bringing information to the school.) Doris began by speaking to all the parents, but by the end of her explanation she was only looking at Mrs. Gabela and directing all of her comments to her. "Es casi parecida a la reunion aquí” (It’s almost like the meeting here).[2] As the eyes of the DELAC rep began to focus more on the resource teacher, I noticed that the noise level began to increase all around me. At times the talking of parents and the shouting of children was so loud that it completely drowned out what Doris and Mrs. Gabela were saying.

“¿Quién quiere ser el representante?” (Who wants to be our representative?), Mrs. Gabela finally asks the group. Elena Rodas (C) asks, “¿Es mucho tiempo?” (Is it a lot of time?). “¿Cuándo es?” (When is it?). Doris tells the group that the meetings are on the south side of the district five times a year. Mrs. Gabela then asks Elena directly, “¿Está dispuesta? (Are you willing?). She nods her head yes. ¿Cómo se llama? (What’s your name?).

Mrs. Gabela was never able to get the meeting under control again. Later, while she tried to explain the difference between a formal and informal complaint, a cell phone rang behind me and the mother took the call and began speaking loudly in Spanish. This behavior seemed to spark additional conversations by those around her. After completing her agenda item, Mrs. Gabela ultimately said something to these mothers. “Prestan atención los de la mesa atrás. Si no prestan atención …” (Those at the back table need to pay attention. If they don’t pay attention …) She then laughed after saying it. In an attempt to curtail some of the sidebar conversations without offending any of the mothers, Mrs. Gabela engaged in a weak strategy for gaining control of the meeting. It was utterly ineffective and the noise and talking continued. Near the end of the meeting, the back table became so loud once again that I could not hear what was being said by another mother. Mrs. Gabela was forced to confront them again and say, “Shhhh.” Unfortunately, she did not echo what was said by the mother and so I, and I assume many other parents, missed what was said. Clearly, the meeting did not go as planned.

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[2] Having sat through the meeting up to this point, I was not convinced that describing it as similar to the meeting we were currently attending was the kind of propaganda that was going to get a lot of volunteers to give up five evenings during the year to represent the school.

The variations noted between the parents’ behavior in the annual meetings and the ELAC meeting described above clearly demonstrates that parents have the ability to choose to enact a range of behaviors from the cultural repertoires, and the choice is not always to the liking of the staff. While it would not be reasonable to assign a pattern of behavior based on the actions of the parents during the first ELAC, especially in light of the fact that Mrs. Noche was not present; however, several of the behaviors that showed up at the first meeting continued, even if at times to a lesser degree, when Mrs. Noche was present. The back table seemed to be a magnet for parents who were not interested in paying attention or participating fully in the meetings. There always seemed to be three or four mothers at the back table who were talking to each other, at times laughing, and occasionally talking on their cell phones. The level of noise would steadily increase as each meeting progressed. In response to this, I noticed that the voices of both Mrs. Gabela and Mrs. Noche would increases to compensate for all the noise.

This kind of behavior stands in stark contrast to behavior that was demonstrated during a particularly unusual morning observation that took place in front of the school on February 20, 2009. That morning, the school held a special flag salute in the yard in front of the school which demonstrated that parents, students, and staff all possessed the needed cultural capacities to enact the necessary strategies of action successfully in school meetings even without repeated admonitions to be quiet.

There were five elderly military service veterans dressed in full uniform at the front gate when my research assistant and I arrived that morning. One was holding an American flag while the rest were at his side, standing in a straight line along the fence where the gate opens to the campus. They were not talking to each other, but they looked happy to see all of the students and their parents entering the campus. I did not see or hear anyone greet them.

As soon as the 8:00 AM bell rang, students were led from the playground area by their teachers through the front gate and out onto the front lawn. There were already approximately 50-60 parents standing along the fence and all around the grassy area where the kids lined up. After the final classroom found its place on the grass, Mrs. Noche greeted everyone in English and Spanish and explained the purpose of the assembly and the special visitors who had come to lead them in the national anthem and pledge. The entire assembly only took about seven or eight minutes to complete. As the students started to move back to their classes in an orderly fashion, the parents began to move away from the school as they headed to their homes and other daily activities.

Unlike other school meetings and events where Mrs. Noche repeatedly asked for students and parents to be quiet and listen, she did not even say it once at this impromptu assembly. As the service members spoke, no one was talking or looking around. The students and parents seemed genuinely interested in what these older men had to say and they showed them the utmost respect. Even though the event took place outdoors and there were nearly 600 people in attendance, everyone naturally showed respect for these gentleman who had served their country in the armed forces.

The behavior of parents and staff at SSC meetings, while quite unique from the ELAC meetings, also followed a pattern each time. Committee members would greet each other, sign-in, pick up their handouts, and then sit around a group of four desks that were pushed together in the center of the resource room. Mrs. Gabela would sheepishly start the meetings after confirming with us that there was a quorum (a majority present of each parity group) by welcoming the members in both English and Spanish. Mrs. Gabela would then follow the agenda religiously, reading each item verbatim.

Both Mrs. Gabela and Mrs. Noche always made sure that all members had signed-in. At the first meeting, after Mrs. Gabela asked if everyone was signed-in, Mrs. Noche emphasized, "Yes, make sure that you sign in." As noted above, the sign in sheet was especially important because it became the legal proof that a quorum was present at the meeting. The mothers that I talked to usually viewed the sign-in sheet as a way of proving that they were there so that their child/children would receive the proper recognition, even though they were not always sure what that might be. Many seemed to think that it was like extra credit.

If not a major problem, language was an obstacle at the SSC meetings. Even though four of the 10 members were mostly fluent in both languages, not everything was translated completely or, at times, some items were translated more than once. Usually, there was at least an attempt at partial translation between English and Spanish. This usually took the form of self translation which is very difficult because one can easily forget what has been translated and what has not. It also can result in things being repeated more than once in both languages for the very same reason. However, one language or the other usually seemed to dominate any given topic being discussed. Interestingly, more often than not, Spanish was the primary language used during the meeting.

For example, when explaining the roles of the SSC at the first meeting, Mrs. Noche made most of her comments in Spanish. She and the teachers mostly concurred that it was important for her to ensure that the parent members understand what was being said. Since the handouts were in both Spanish and English, the non-Spanish speakers were expected to follow along by reading the handouts. Everyone seemed to forget, however, that the male member of the SSC also did not speak Spanish. He never said anything, but he clearly was not a part of all of the conversations and explanations.

A humorous, yet telling, example of the language challenges that confronted the SSC occurred during the first meeting. After giving a passionate explanation of the school plan and how teachers use CST cluster reports to plan instruction in Spanish, Mrs. Noche asked the teachers if they had anything to add. One non-Spanish speaking teacher responded to her, “I don’t speak Spanish so I don’t know what you already said.” Everyone laughed. Mrs. Noche then did her best to repeat what she had been saying in English.

In spite of all the missteps on meeting norms and procedures, when Mrs. Noche was present, she was the one that attempted to make everyone feel comfortable. She always greeted everyone warmly and did her best to make sure that everyone else had been introduced to one another. Mrs. Noche was gregarious and laughed loudly as she recounted the best qualities of each SSC member. Mrs. Noche never failed to tell me about the successes of the children of the mothers and even the duty aides. She switched easily between English and Spanish and she made everyone feel as though either language was of equal value.

These positive relationships were not, however, able to move the SSC towards the completion of its mission, namely the making of decisions. Other than the acceptance of the proposed dates for future meetings at the first SSC there were no other decisions that the committee was ever asked to make when I was in attendance. The SSC was supposed to make many decisions regarding the SPSA (school plan) and school budget. Yet, even though decisions were recorded as having taken place during the first and second SSC meetings on the 2008-09 SSC-SDM Planning/Monitoring Tool, no such decisions every occurred during these meetings. In other words, decisions were being made, the SPSA was submitted to the district for board approval at the end of November and categorical budgets were regularly revised and submitted to the MESBP office, but these decisions were made by the principal, and possibly others, but not the SSC.

Taken as a whole, the meetings did not accomplish their mission. In addition to seeming rushed, the meetings did not make shared decisions. The necessary paperwork was submitted to the district, but the minutes and agendas did not accurately portray what occurred at the meetings. While the meetings were designed to make sure that schools would be compliant with all state and federal guidelines, and, most importantly, able to pass a state review if necessary, what I observed certainly did not qualify as meeting the goals of the regulations. This may in part explain why none of the mothers I interviewed, including connected mothers who were members of the SSC, ever mentioned the SSC as a viable means for making improvements at the school. Parents believed that the primary method for resolving problems or making changes was to first speak with the principal, and, if that was ineffective, go to the district office. The notion of a shared, decision-making committee at the school as embodied by the SSC was not part of the parents' cultural capital even when they were members on the committee.

Social and educational events

At the Winter Programs, the cafeteria was filled beyond capacity each night. Both evenings, the foyer to the cafeteria was standing room only and the wall leading to the office was filled with large baby strollers. Each night, I claimed a small portion of wall space at the back of the cafeteria. From that vantage point I was able to see the entire cafeteria, stage, and the back foyer area.

I noted differences in the crowds each night. The first evening, I would estimate that parents and visitors in the front 2/3 of the cafeteria were seated quietly, doing exactly what the principal had requested. The back 1/3, and especially the back 10%, in particular those standing in the foyer which was also the area with the least amount of light, had ignored her completely. The darkness of the back area provided anonymity. As each group was ready to perform, Mrs. Noche could be heard telling the students to sit down and be quiet on the floor. Each time it seemed to take more and more admonishments to get them to do what she wanted. After addressing the students, she then repeated the same thing to the parents. “If we’ll all be quiet, we can get started.” No sooner did the words leave her mouth and a mother next to me yelled out to someone about 20 feet away. Additionally, several babies and toddlers were crying and yelling out. It was very loud. Small groups in the back corners of the cafeteria had formed and they were talking and laughing with each other just as if they were getting together at a bar for drinks on a Friday night. Some actually were drinking sodas and water.

In addition to the noise, as soon as a class finished singing, perhaps a half dozen or so adults near the front of the cafeteria would stand up and push their way across the cafeteria to the right side and exit through the door to the campus. This type of movement continued throughout the entire program. As each performance ended, parents would get up and make their way to one of the exits. These parents just pushed their way through the crowd. I did not hear anyone say “excuse me,” “pardon me,” or its equivalent in Spanish, “con permiso.” As each group exited, the rest of the crowd would shift to take the places of those who had left or just enjoyed the additional personal space. The benefit to what otherwise would have been considered rude behavior was that everyone had a little more personal space as the evening continued. Perhaps this was why no one overtly seemed to mind the exodus.

On the second evening, the manners of the audience were markedly different. While the students were performing, almost all of the parents were quiet and focused on the children, even those in the back of the room and the foyer area. They all seemed to genuinely be taking pleasure in the program as a whole. While parents were primarily interested in watching their own children, this sentiment did not seem to prohibit them from enjoying the other performances as well (as did I).

This change in behavior overall may simply be attributable to the fact that there was a different set of individuals at the second program. However, there were several other differences that may have influenced the audience. First, the program for the second evening included the admonition, in both English and Spanish, to “Please pick up your child in his/her classroom *at the end of the last performance*.” Second, before the second group of students got up to sing, Mrs. Noche explicitly told the audience to take note of the message at the bottom of the program reiterating that they were supposed to pick up their children at the end of the last performance.

The first night, no such announcement was ever made even though the commotion caused by this constant exodus was very distracting. Throughout the student performances, Mrs. Noche repeatedly asked for the audience to be quiet to no avail. Some in the audience did not seem to know how to act, and Mrs. Noche did not take the time to articulate her expectations. At one point she did add that “it would be nice if everyone would sit through the entire program.” However, a large number of parents decided not to take her weak message to heart and the noise and commotion continued.

When parents were given clear directives on what they were to do the second night, almost everyone complied. The audience was not just told to be respectful, that had happened during the first evening with little results. The audience was given specific information on what a respectful audience looks like. This was clearly part of their cultured capacities because it was acted upon immediately without additional admonishments. It seems that it also took the additional efforts of Mrs. Noche to make the code widespread before it was heeded.

Once again, there is a stark contrast to the parent behaviors during social events and educations events. The educational events held at the school required a completely different set of responses. For example, no admonishments or directives were needed to control the small group of parents who gathered in the cafeteria for the short introduction to the Family Literacy Night. Parents and students simply exited the cafeteria and made their way to the classrooms in almost complete silence. No one was talking as they entered the room. The parents took their seats and then waited quietly. Parents looked through the handout that they were given page by page as they waited for the session to begin. While I occasionally heard a child whisper something to his parent, there was no loud talking in the room. All the sounds were subdued.

Throughout the presentation, all the adults were very attentive, nodding their heads as the teachers spoke. At one point, a father yawned, looking noticeably exhausted. This father seemed to be showing his son the importance of school and the price he was willing to pay to obtain it. Another father sat up straight with his arm on his son's shoulder for much of the presentation. This father had transformed a lesson on literacy into an opportunity to bond with his son.

The mood and noise level did change significantly when the teachers got to the game portion of the presentation. The second grade students who were not already seated with their parents were asked to join them so that they could help them play WORDO. One of the fathers next to me had his fourth grade son write the words on the paper as he watched his second grade son play the game. "Está bien, hijo, buscamos "word" (OK, son, let's find "word"). There was a great deal of intensity and interest as the families played the game together. Moms and dads were smiling and laughing with their children. The interest increased even further as two prizes were given out. Everyone applauded as the winners received their prizes.

When parents were asked at the end if they had any questions, the teachers soon discovered that no one had any questions that they wanted to ask *in front of the group*. After the parents were dismissed, several of the parents stayed behind to ask Mrs. Perez questions in Spanish. One mother asked the teacher how her son was doing and if he was having problems reading the white board. “No noté que tenía problemas viendo el pizarón” (I hadn’t noticed that he had problems reading the board), Mrs. Perez replied. The teacher shook each mother’s hand after talking with her and told them, “Gracias, hasta luego” (Thanks, see you later). Mrs. Perez gave her undivided attention to each mother. She focused on their face and nodded as they asked their questions. No one asked the non-Spanish speaking teacher any questions. This concurs with what the parents I interviewed told me about how much easier it was for them to communicate with Spanish-speaking teachers. This was noted as more of a concern by the detached mothers.

A similar range of behaviors was noted at the Family Math Night. The parents were as quiet and focused as they had been during the Family Literacy Nights. However, I noticed that after the parents and students completed the first practice together, the volume of the student voices began to increase. The loudest students were those who were not in first or second grade—the level for which the session was intended. Norma Robles (C), who had three children with her, shushes someone else’s child who was not sitting with his parent. The child quickly complied. Norma had strong opinions about education and its importance. Unlike most of the mothers I observed previously, Norma felt empowered enough to correct someone else's child successfully.

The activity that the teachers presented to the parents was highly involved and many of the students did not seem to know what they were supposed to do. Even when Ms. Greer circulated around the room to assist parents, many had difficulties following the instructions. The activity took so long and required so much concentration by both the parent and the child that some of the parents became a little discouraged, losing hope or desire to do this at home. One would have to have been very committed to do an activity like this every day. One of the teachers asked in English, "Is this something you'll do at home with your child?" A few say "yes" (in English), but the majority just laughed.

Throughout most of the presentation that evening, the mothers were not given the opportunity to ask any questions or solicit further explanations. At one point, however, an English-speaking mother who had arrived late interrupted the presentation and asked the teacher a question. The teacher went over to the mother and answered her question while all of the Spanish-speaking mothers waited quietly. The teacher did not translate the question or the answer into Spanish so that the rest of the parents could be a part of the conversation.

This is a good example of the different approaches to parental involvement that are employed by different parents. The English speaking mother, like the rest of the group, was not given a chance to ask questions. This, however, did not stop her from interrupting the teacher to acquire the information she desired. She was not intimidated by the teacher and did not care that she had arrived late. Six Spanish-speaking mothers, who had been there for nearly an hour, never interrupted the teachers or deviated from what they were told to do. I do not know the socioeconomic status of this mother, but clearly, her ability to speak English fluently and her familiarity with the public school system in the U.S. gave her great confidence in gaining information. Interestingly enough, after the English-speaking mother received the answer to her question, it was as if the teachers woke up, and, for the first time, asked the Spanish-speaking parents, “¿Otra pregunta?” (Another question?). No one had any questions.

While the number of parents in attendance was small, I observed the ones that did attend carefully organizing their game pieces on their desks. I noticed that as the teacher gave the words for the bingo card, the mothers would not only look at their own cards, but they were also closely watching the cards of their children. The mothers spoke very softly with their children, helping them to find the correct word. Learning these skills was not easy due to competing demands for their time and attention. Every few moments, the calmness of the room was broken by the piercing shout of one of the toddlers. Others were cooing or singing to themselves. Every few minutes I heard, “Mommy, oye” (Mommy, look here). The toddlers constantly demanded the attention of their mothers. When I conducted my interviews with the mothers, both connected and detached mothers with toddlers faced the same distractions. I can imagine that this also happened at home as these mothers attempted to implement these new skills with their school-aged children.

Summary

In this chapter, I present an interpretive/cultural analysis of the key types of patterned behaviors that these mothers exhibited towards the education of their children and the institution formally charged with their schooling. I developed insight into patterns of sociocultural behaviors in relation to the daily ingress and egress of students, interpersonal interactions, and meetings and events.

There are several patterns that appear to be guiding parent behavior during the ingress and egress of students at Orange Elementary. First, verbal interactions between children and their parents are minimal. Most of the time, the majority of these parents elected to passively observe their children and the surroundings. These parents demonstrated their love for their children and the value they placed on education by simply being present. Few routinely engaged in any more than that at the school.

Furthermore, when the school clearly stated and consistently enforced expectations for parent behavior, there was nearly universal compliance. Parents were able to successfully behave in ways that allowed them to conform to the school policies regarding ingress and egress procedures while at the same time ensuring the safety of their children by accepting custodial responsibilities at times as a group and at other times individually. Even major differences such as the open campus at the start of the school day and the closed campus at dismissal did not create problems for the school or confusion for the parents.

Overall, there seemed to be a pattern of disconnectedness between the teachers and the parents, including the mothers who were the most connected to the school overall. Whether it was the SSC, the literacy night, or the math night, the relationships between parents and teachers seemed to be limited to either friendly greetings or parents asking teachers questions about their children. Even when teachers were given the opportunity to spend time with parents, like before an educational event was to begin, they chose to separate themselves both linguistically and spatially.

What appears to be clear with regards to the Mexican immigrant mothers in this study, is that it does not matter how timid or humble a mother may appear, she has strong views on education and the direction that she and her family are headed in life. While there is an underlying respect for educators in general, that does translate into blind acceptance of everything that educators present. The low turnout at events that educators feel are important is evidence of this. Surely, the attendance at the Family Literacy and Math Nights would have been as large as that of the winter programs if immigrants were simpletons who only followed the orders of American educators. They make choices. And they have chosen not to attend poorly conducted meetings and events that they do not think will meet their needs.

CHAPTER 6

The Tools: Cultured Capacities

In chapter five, we were able to see the ways that an array of individuals at Orange Elementary, particularly Mexican immigrant mothers, routinely lived out their lives in relation to the school. These practices, however, are often overlooked or misunderstood by educators and researchers. Swidler (2001) provides us with a mechanism for more precisely understanding these sociolcultural behaviors as strategies of action which are the culturally shaped practices that individuals routinely utilize when confronted with life's challenges. For Swidler, "strategies of action are general solutions to the problem of how to organize action over time, rather than specific ways of attaining particular ends" (p.82). The focus, then, is on the *means* available to an individual within the framework of her culture and social world rather than an individual's goals or particular ends. In turn, these patterns of behaviors or strategies of action are constrained by the repertoire of cultured capacities, or tools, that an individual possesses. This chapter will explore the cultured capacities that these individuals possess and utilize in order to construct these strategies of action. We have seen how the Mexican immigrant mothers in my study related to the U.S. public school that educated their children, and now we will explore a cultural explanation for that behavior.

Recognizing the tools or cultured capacities that are available to an individual because of culture is vital to understanding behavior because a person cannot perform an action if the capacity to perform that action does not exist within the individual. For example, a Mexican immigrant mother cannot aspire to be a voting member of the School

Site Council (SSC) if the possibility of an SSC or even a parent's participation in decision making at a school is not something that she is aware exists. Furthermore, in order for a cultured capacity to become a strategy of action, an individual must not only be familiar with the possibility of such an action, he or she must also have the confidence to perform the skill as the result of experience and practice. Thus, even if a mother is familiar with concept of an SSC, if she has never attended an actual meeting or attempted to express an opinion, her strategy of action with regard to school governance may look the same, namely inaction. The behavior is predicated upon the capacity. The capacities are the resources that are made available through one's culture.

While talking with Mexican immigrant parents both formally and informally, I wanted to discover the cultural resources that they used to think about schooling and their involvement in it. Was there a common set of cultural traditions, symbols, and rituals or were there variations? I was also interested in discovering how their current experience in a U.S. school had impacted their thinking and behavior. Do schools in the U.S. have expectations for parent behavior that may be impossible for some parents to carry out because either the cultured capacities do not exist, or, due to a lack of practice, it is not a strategy of action that they feel capable of performing?

What I found was a surprisingly similar set of cultural resources for both connected and detached mothers that held up across the location and social class[1] they experienced during their upbringing in Mexico. This chapter will explore the cultured capacities of these individuals in four broad categories. The first will focus on how thoughts and feelings were utilized to fashion a particular kind identity. Next, I will analyze their skills, styles, and habits that were the most frequently accessed when choosing strategies of action. This will be followed by a description of group membership and how affiliation with a greater number of groups increased the range of cultural resources that were available to an individual. Finally, I will examine several aspects of worldview that had a direct impact on parent behavior.

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[1] While none of the mothers I interviewed were raised in wealthy families, and the majority occupied various levels of the lower class, several were part of Mexico's middle class.

Thoughts and Feelings

Drawing on Geertz's (1973) concept of "moods and motivations" to describe how culture works to support one's worldview, Swidler (2001) suggests that one's culture provides a diverse set of capacities to think and feel which are then used by an individual to fashion a particular kind of identity. Individuals can then choose strategies of action that are predicated upon the self that they have chosen to create. As expected, individuals vary greatly in the degree to which they use their culture for both the internal organization of capacities as well as the actions they choose to exercise. Additionally, there seems to be a fine line separating the thoughts and feelings of this section from worldview below, especially when discussing education. I have chosen to include these Mexican immigrant mothers' views on the importance and value of education for them, personally, and Latinos, generally, in this section because for most of them, their opinions on education do not seem to have solidified into an overarching belief system of how the world works.

Norma Robles (C) exemplifies how an individual can choose strategies of action based on a set of cultural capacities that were passed on to her by her parents in order to create a particular identity for herself. Norma was the sixth of 10 children. While she was unable to study past the ninth grade because her town did not have a high school, formal education was very important for her family when she was growing up. She said, “Mi mamá y mi papá siempre estaban en todas las juntas de la escuela.” (My mother and father were always at all of the school meetings.) She credits her views on education, however, to the example of her father.

> “Y eso es lo que les platico a mis hijos, que mi papá siempre tuvo ganas de estudiar. Y como allá … lo que hizo que le dijo a mi abuelita que él quería entrar al… al seminario…. Le digo a mis hijos que fue bien inteligente. El trabaja en la presidencia del pueblo. El trabajo muchos años allí de ... de secretario, haciendo varias cosas ahí en la presidencia porque dijo mi papá que él miraba a sus hermanos como andaban con la pala, y que él decía que él no quería eso para mí. El tenía ganas de estudiar y superarse.”

> “And that is what I tell my children, that my father always wanted to study. And like it’s done there … what he did was, he told my grandmother that he wanted to enter … the seminary…. I tell my kids that he was very intelligent. He worked in city hall. He worked for many years there … as a secretary, doing various things in the city hall. Because my father said that he saw how his brothers went around with a shovel, and he said that he did not want that for himself. He had a desire to study and become successful.”
> (I: Robles, 12/15/09)

Norma was clearly proud of her father and it was his example that transformed her way of thinking. Education, in Norma’s mind, was a way to get a better job, an office job as opposed to a job using “la pala” (a shovel).

To ensure that her children received a good education and would “superarse” (become successful), Norma was very involved at the school. Even though money was tight, she did not work. “Valió la pena” (It was worth it) to her to be able to spend time with her children and oversee their studies. For her, a good parent did more than just provide for his or her children financially. “Yo pienso que lo esencial para un hijo es que el papá se preocupa por él. Que el papá está allí.” (I think that the essential think for a child is that the parent is concerned about him. That the parent is there.) Norma’s actions concurred with this belief.

> “El primer día que entran en la escuela, yo llego y les digo: ‘Me llamo Norma Robles. Soy la mamá de Carlos. Cualquier cosa dígame o cualquier cosa avísame. Yo sé que todo no es su trabajo de Usted, también es mío.’”

> “The first day they enter school, I go and tell them: ‘My name is Norma Robles. I am the mother of Carlos. If there’s anything, tell me, or if there’s anything, let me know. I know that it isn’t all your work, it’s mine, too.’” (I: Robles, 12/15/09)

Norma’s actions were guided by thoughts of what a good parent was like as well as her ideas about the importance of education for her children. These thoughts had been influenced by the example of her father.

Doris Silva (C) had a very different experience when she was growing up. Like Norma, Doris was from a large family with eight children. When their family moved from the ranch to the city when she was seven, she and her siblings were forced to go to work because her father died. “Fue el problema que ya tuvimos que trabajar desde pequeños. Y en si estudié desde la primaria hasta la secundaria. Y en mis estudios, pues, no son al nivel, pero supe salir adelante.” (The problem was that we had to work from when we were young. And I did study from elementary through middle school. And in my studies, well, they are not at the right level, but I learned how to overcome.)

Even though her mother had to work, and she never attended any meetings or events at the school, Doris credits her mother as having the greatest influence in her life.

> “La principal influencia que mi madre tuvo conmigo fue que siempre estaba allí, aunque ella trabajaba, siempre estaba pendiente de que no faltáramos a la escuela, de que tuviéramos comida, fuéramos limpios, fuéramos listos para aprender. Y como lo decía ella, ‘Es mi esperanza con ustedes.’ No le sacamos un grado pero nunca la defraudamos de no ir a la escuela. Siempre íbamos a la escuela. Y ella fue la mejor influencia porque ella nos enseñó a valorar la vida, a valorar el dinero … que se gana con esfuerzo y más. Cuando no se tiene un estudio que es más difícil. Yo estoy muy orgullosa de mi madre, porque siendo soltera, trabajo muy duro, muy duro.”

> “The main influence that my mother had on me was that she was always there, even though she had to work, she was always making sure that we didn’t miss school, that we had food, that we were clean, that we were ready to learn. And as she would say, ‘You are my hope.’ We may not have gotten the best grades, but we never let her down by not going to school. We always went to school. And she was the best influence because she taught us to value life, to value money … that you get ahead through effort, and more. It’s more difficult when one doesn’t have an education. I’m very proud of my mother, because as a single mom, she worked very hard, very hard.”
> (I: Silva, 12/12/08)

The lessons Doris learned from her mother combined with the challenges and successes of her own life experience have greatly influenced her views on parenting as well as the importance of education. Doris had more to say during our interviews than any other mother. She was involved at every level of the school, including SSC and district committees. Her reasons for being so highly involved were clear, “Yo vengo porque tengo a mi hijo aquí.” (I come because I have my child here.) And what did she hope to gain? “Y yo sé que si yo ayudo, cualquier cosa que yo necesite, yo lo he comprobado que siempre estoy allí. Y ella [the principal] siempre me da la preferencia porque sabe que yo le doy mi tiempo.” (And I know that if I help, whatever I may need, I have proven that I’m always there. And she [the principal] always gives me preferential treatment because she knows that I give her my time.)

Like Norma, she, too, made sure that her children's teachers knew who she was from the beginning. She gave them her telephone number and told them to get a hold of her if there were any problems. Norma also employed her belief that by volunteering she would receive preferential treatment by adding that she was willing to help in any way possible. Furthermore, if things did not go well with the teacher or the school, she was ready to stand up for her children. "Yo meto a las manos al fuego por mis hijos" (I'll put my hands in the fire for my kids), she told me.

Celia Lemus (C) believed that good parents are "involucrado en la educación de los niños" (involved in the education of their children). She actively chose strategies of action to live up to that standard. I saw her at every school event and every school meeting except for the SSC meetings where visitors were not encouraged to attend. She was soft spoken and well liked by the other connected mothers. At the focus group session, only after being persuaded by several other mothers, Celia reluctantly recounted a problem she had experienced with a pre-school teacher who had ignored her volunteer efforts. She clearly was uncomfortable talking about it, and expressed her opinion that it was in the past and did not have to affect the present. She wanted to stay focused on how her work could help children.

Her actions, however, were not without inner conflict. For her, being involved with her children was not limited to school but included going to the park. She admitted, "Trato de involucrarme con ellos, que a veces me da ... no tengo ganas de ir, pero a veces tengo que sacar fuerzas para acompañarlos." (I try to be involved with them, but sometimes I get … I don't feel like going, so sometimes I have to make myself go with them.) She did it because she knew that “solamente así se motivan” (this is the only way to motivate them). She added, “Les digo, me van a ser las tareas y los voy a sacar a fútbol y ellos ya…. le echan más ganas.” (I tell them, you’re going to do your homework and I’m going to take you to play soccer and they ... they try harder.) Celia engaged in active cultural work by choosing strategies of action that were shaped by her views of herself and who she wanted to be.

Celia, with her meek manner and soft voice, was not the only one concealing her inner feelings with a reserved demeanor. You may remember in chapter five how the behavior of Elena Rodas (C) never revealed her thoughts on the disruptive behavior of the children all around her. Like the majority of the parents I observed, she appeared to be focused on the speaker and did not seem to notice the commotion. Her strategy of action, however, masked her true thoughts on what was taking place. She was not only bothered by the behavior, but she was also concerned that the school was putting itself at risk for a lawsuit if a child was to be injured. Like Celia, Elena also engaged in active cultural work by choosing to act in a way that matched the persona she hoped to be.

It was not only connected mothers who engaged in this type of active cultural work. Disengaged mothers were more than capable of doing it as well. During a morning observation, a disengaged mother tried to use her culture to understand what I was doing at her child’s school. After talking for several minutes, she knew that I was both a student at the university and an educator. She was curious about our morning routine at the school where I worked so I explained some of the similarities and differences with the breakfast routine. She then asked me what I did there. She was quite surprised when I told her that I was the principal. She immediately followed up by asking how I was able to be there in the morning and not at my own school. I explained that I was able to use vacation time and that I had several non-classroom teachers who were in charge while I was away.

This was a great series of questions that again demonstrates that even seemingly soft spoken immigrant mothers have legitimate questions and ideas about the how and why of what they see at school. They are not ignorant foreigners who blindly accept everything that educators do at the school. I, too, would have wondered how a principal was able to miss his own school's morning routine while standing around talking to parents at another school. I also explained that I planned on taking back the things I was learning to improve my school. She seemed to like that a lot.

Yet not all mothers allowed their noble views on the importance of education to influence their behavior. Blanca Resto (D) faced many challenges when she was growing up in Mexico. Although her father had very little formal education, he was the one who always asked her, "¿Ya hicieron su tarea para mañana?" (Have you already completed your homework for tomorrow?) He would tell them if they did not want to end up like him, they needed to study. He died, however, before she was able to complete high school and her mother stopped sending her to school.

Blanca told me that she always liked going to school and that she received good grades. While her father was still alive, she remembers that her mother worked in the home and always attended all of the meetings in the school. Her mother always knew her teachers and even the principal by name. Her parents' example had an impact on her thinking about school. When asked to describe a good parent from Mexico, she said,

> "Para mí, o sea, un buen padre de familia mexicana, es aquel que, yo pienso, que no entiende el inglés que es lo principal en la educación del niño y aun así intenta involucrarse en, en la educación del hijo o hija, los trabajos, tareas, participaciones de venir a la escuela. Eso es para mí un ejemplo de padre mexicano."

> "For me, I mean, a good parent of a Mexican family, it is one that, I think, that doesn't understand English which is the most important thing in the education of a child, and, even so, tries to get involved in, in the education of a son or daughter, their projects, homework, going to the school to participate. That for me is an example of a Mexican parent."
> (I: Campos, 2/17/09)

Blanca's views on good parenting coincided with the example given to her by her parents, but it also was similar to the views of Norma, Doris, Celia, and most of the other mothers that I interviewed. The cultured capacities were nearly identical. However, when it came to enacting these capacities, Blanca chose a different strategy of action. Laughing, she told me, "La verdad, que yo nunca, desde que tengo a mi niño en kinder, yo no he venido a ninguna reunión más que a la conferencia." (The truth, that I never, ever since I had my son in kindergarten, I have never come to any meeting except for the conference.) Her laugh, whether due to a bit of embarrassment or the simple recognition of what she was admitting to, highlighted the mismatch between her actions and her beliefs.

The reason for Blanca's failure to get involved was precisely one of the stipulations she mentioned above for what makes a good parent: "que no entiende el ingles … y aun así intenta" (that doesn't understand English … and even so tries). She believed that a good parent got involved in spite of the language barrier; yet, in her own life, she admitted, "Al menos si yo entendería el inglés, me gustaría involucrarme más de lo que estoy involucrando, más con mi niño en la educación." (If only I understood English, I would like to get involved more than I am involved, more with my son in his education). Unlike the connected mothers, Blanca brought up language again and again in both the interview and focus group session. In fact, during the focus group, referring to the teachers, she asked, ¿Sería mucho pedir que hablan inglés y español? (Would it be too much to ask that they speak English and Spanish?) Her inability to speak English became the pretext for not employing her cultured capacities to get involved at school. Unlike Celia who engaged in active cultural work to select strategies of action to make herself into the person she wanted to be, even if, at times, she had to "sacar fuerzas" (find the strength, i.e., make herself do it); Blanca was able to forgo her ideal and take the path of least resistance.

It is at this point that we may have discovered a clue to understanding the contradictory views expressed in the literature as to whether or not Latinos value education. All of the mothers I interviewed stated that formal education was important for their children and that Latinos valued education. They all felt that in order for their children to have a good life, they needed to get as much education as possible. Yet there was a thin line of action that separated some of the connected mothers from the rest. Their thoughts and feelings had developed into what might best be described as a new worldview. For them, it was not enough to simply think or feel that education was important; their strategies of action were continually being guided by these thoughts. It was as if the formal education of their children had become a driving force in their lives.

Norma Robles (C) was one of the mothers best able to articulate her views on education and its importance for her and her children. As we saw above, her views and actions were so closely aligned that it was difficult to find a discrepancy between the two. Her views on education were so strong, in fact, that she made a choice not to work even though their financial situation was “más apretadas” (tighter). She said, “Yo pienso mientras mis hijos estén chicos y yo pueda ayudarlos aquí en la escuela, pues, yo voy a estar aquí.” (I think that while my children are small and I can help them here at school, well, I’m going to be here.) Unlike Blanca (D), who also did not work, Norma was committed to the notion of ensuring a good education for her children. An example of this dedication was when, unlike most mothers I interviewed, she was able to articulate the academic levels of her children, even giving examples of the number of words her children could read in a minute compared with the expectations of their teachers. “Y dice la maestra que tienen que leer 157 y él va en 205” (And the teacher says that they have to read 157 and he is at 205). The value Norma placed on education was indisputable.

Dora Sanchez (C) was another such mother. As we will see later, her entire day was geared towards the education of her children. She, too, chose to make financial sacrifices in order to have a greater impact on her children’s studies.

> “Porque siempre me están diciendo que yo no tengo casa, pero les digo: ‘Tú tienes casa, tienes muchos carros, ¿y tus hijos? No pones atención en tus hijos…. Mejor estoy en este apartamento feo, y estoy acá con mis hijos y mejor que mi esposo nomás que trabaje….’”

> “Because they are always saying to me that I don’t have a house, but I say to them, ‘You have a house, you have many cars, and your children? You don’t pay attention to your children…. It’s better for me to be in this ugly apartment, and to be here with my children and it’s better that only my husband works….”
> (I: Sanchez, 12/19/08)

Dora knew the price she was paying to help her children get the kind of education that she had wanted for herself but did not receive. Her beliefs about the importance of education for the success of her children were acted upon with specific strategies of action.

Yet not all mothers chose this course of action. Many of the mothers I spoke to were more like Blanca (D). They said education was important, but they did not choose to act in ways that were congruent with those views. Diana Salcedo (D) thought that education was important, but she had doubts that her children would even graduate from high school. Like Norma (C) and Dora (C), Diana did not work outside the home, but unlike them, she did not focus her attention on the schooling of her children. She did not attend any school meetings or events. Like Blanca, she, too was hindered by her inability to overcome the language barrier. Also, she had doubts about the ability of education to improve one's life. When asked about the importance of formal education, she told us,

> "Allá en México, no, no importan mucho, porque hay personas que tienen, que han salido de una universidad de una licenciatura, de maestro, o lo que sea, tienen sus títulos de profesional y no hay trabajo para ellos…. Allá, él que estudió para licenciado está vendiendo paletas en la calle o tiene un puesto de taquitos."

> "There in Mexico, no, they don't matter much, because there are people that have, that have left the university with a degree, a teaching certificate, or whatever; they have their professional titles and there are no jobs for them…. There, even the one who studied for a degree is selling popsicles on the street or has a taco stand."
> (I: Salcedo, 2/20/09)

It should be noted that Diana's husband was a former teacher in Mexico who was not working as a teacher in the U.S. He showed up halfway through the focus group for disengaged mothers and made it clear that he did not agree with the U.S. education system. Both Diana and her husband were especially critical of the way homework was administered. While she thought that education was important, her life experience did not allow for a worldview that exalted formal education to a place of prominence in her life.

As is evident here and in numerous additional comments made to me during my time at Orange Elementary, the thoughts about education and a parent's role in it by connected and detached mothers were almost indistinguishable. What separated one parent from another were not the cultured capacities, but rather the strategies of actions they chose employ. When asked why some parents do not get involved at the school, connected and detached parents alike mentioned a lack of time, working outside the home, lack of interest, inability to understand English, and laziness. When connected mothers were asked why they chose to get involved many talked about their profound interest in their children and their schooling, some mentioned the importance of being present at the school, regardless of one's ability to understand the meeting, while others said that they wanted to be knowledgeable about the environment that their children were being exposed to at school.

Skills, Styles, and Habits

We saw in the previous section that people do not always act upon what they think, even when it is reportedly important to them. In fact, we possess more cultural capacities than we will ever need or care to use. For example, my wife understands that some people have chosen to be in gangs. She knows people who have been in gangs and is aware of some of the cultural elements of gang life such as tattoos, tagging, and certain kinds of clothing. She, however, will never become part of a gang (or at least that is what she tells me). The capacity is there, but the will to use it is not. On the other hand, while she would never willing participate in skydiving as a form of entertainment, she would certainly do it if someone handed her a parachute and told her to jump out of a plane that was about to crash.

In this section, I will analyze, not the rare or unusual, but rather those capacities most frequently accessed when choosing strategies of action. I will highlight the skills, styles, and habits that the Mexican immigrant mothers I studied are “good at” (Swidler, 2001, p. 73). At the same time, it is important to recognize that these seemingly “common” behaviors are what individuals from one culture are most likely to notice as being “unusual” when coming into contact with people from a different culture because the behaviors do not work well in a different environment. Culture shock is one response of an individual to these unusual habits or ways of doing things.

The school campus allowed me to observe numerous examples of the skills and habits of parents at Orange Elementary that were discussed in chapter five. For example, during official meetings, the majority of parents demonstrated exemplary listening skills, paying close attention to the speaker. Yet, these same parents did not possess inquiry skills, or, at least, the comfort to employ them in meetings or at school educational events. When asked by Mrs. Noche if anyone had a question, “¿Alguien tiene una pregunta?” The most frequent pattern of response was silence. When I spoke with parents individually, they all acknowledged that it was important for students to ask questions in class. Connected and detached parents alike told me that they encouraged their children to ask questions in class. The cultural capacity existed, but the familiarity with using the skill themselves was lacking.

In contrast, an English-speaking mother at Family Math Night is a good example of a mother who did not feel inhibited about asking questions. When the teacher failed to give the group an opportunity to ask questions, she exhibited no difficulty interrupting the teacher to ask her question. She was not intimidated by the teacher and did not care that she had arrived late. The six Spanish-speaking mothers, who had been there for nearly an hour, never interrupted the teachers or deviated from what they were told to do. The ability to speak English fluently and a familiarity with the dominant culture seemed to make a difference in both the style and habits of the mothers I observed.

Yet, while many immigrant parents I observed may have been reticent about asking questions, that did not stop some of them from consistently attending educational events at school so that they could improve their skills for helping their children do better at school. The teachers provided them with skills that mirrored what was currently happening in the classrooms. While the number of parents in attendance was never large, the parents and students that did attend the sessions were highly motivated to learn the skills. I observed immigrant mothers speaking softly with their children in Spanish, helping them to do the various activities correctly. They were learning new cultured capacities and they were practicing them so that they would become skilled strategies of action.

There are also many examples of skills and habits that I observed of individual mothers. You may remember the specialized skills of Elena Rodas (C) who performed everything from hallway guard duty to traffic control in the front of the school. While definitely confident, her personal style was that of a lone ranger. She did not socialize or work on projects with other mothers at the site. Esther Muniz (C), on the other hand, enjoyed being with other mothers and was one of the leaders at the Thursday Volunteer gatherings, even teaching me how to properly sort second grade workbook pages. Her style, while sociable, was not warm. It took work and time to get to be a part of her inner circle.

Some mothers, like Dora Sanchez (C), utilized interpersonal skills to get what she needed to help her children from their teachers. Dora was raised in a small village, "un ranchito," in Michoacán, the third of nine siblings. She only attended school through the seventh grade because she was already 15 when they opened the middle school, and she felt embarrassed to be so much older than the other students in the class. I actively sought out Dora for my study because the way in which she skillfully interacted with teachers at various school events caught my attention right from the beginning. Dora was quiet yet determined. She was very friendly, but, like Elena, I rarely saw her interacting with other mothers. She was focused on her children and staying closely connected with their teachers.

Like other immigrant parents at the school, I never heard Dora ask a question in front of the group. What she did do was to wait patiently after the meeting to speak to the teacher or principal one-on-one. Even while she was waiting in line, I observed her listening intently to what the teacher was saying to the parents in front of her. She did not waste even one moment. At the Family Literacy Night, I first saw her in the second grade session, and then I later saw her again that same evening in the third grade classroom that her husband, and my assistant, had attended. Once again, she was asking the teacher questions about her son’s homework and what he could do to improve. She later told us that she went to talk to the third grade teacher even though her husband had been in the session because “él no sabe como que yo quiero preguntarle” (he doesn’t know how I want to ask the question). She was not about to allow her son’s success in school be jeopardized by a possible misunderstanding. She also told us that she talked to the teachers “todos los días” (every day). Dora had a skill for getting information and materials from her children’s teachers and she used it frequently.

When asked what kinds of activities she did at home with her children, she made mention of the items she received from the school and her children’s teachers.

> “Al más grande le gusta mucho el fútbol, pues, mi esposo es él que juega con él. Pero yo así, cualquier cosita, así jueguitos de que llegan de la escuela. Nos ponemos hacer como Bingo, hacer de las tablas, una hoja que la maestra también me, me mandó, porque ella me pregunto que si yo estaba interesada de que ella tenía muchas cosas como hacer para que aprendan las tablas, y estamos allí jugando y así los emociona uno.”

> “The oldest really likes to play soccer, so my husband is the one that plays with him. But for me, whatever little thing, like little games that come from school. We play Bingo, go over math tables, a page that the teacher sent me, because she asked me if I was interested since she had so many things to do in order to learn the tables, and there we are playing and one gets excited about it.”
> (I: Sanchez, 12/19/08)

Dora did not waste the teacher’s time with idle questions. What she learned, she used. She went on to explain that each of her children wanted her undivided attention so she had to try a different “táctica” (tactic) “Táctica” was the word she used, and a word she had undoubtedly learned in a parent meeting or talking with teachers. The result, she modified her behavior by first working with one and then the other. “Revisamos una tarea y leemos, y luego hacemos otra cosa y luego otra cosa.” (We review the homework and read, and then we do something else, and then later something else.) She incorporated many educational games so that her children could have fun while learning at the same time. She told us that her friends and neighbors had a hard time believing her when she told them that she did not have a problem getting her children to do their homework. She explained that she simple says, “Andale, que tu tarea, que mira que vamos a estudiar” (Let’s get going, to your homework, what are we going to study), and they get their books and go to work. Later, she checks to make sure it is correct. Dora has used her interpersonal skills to obtain information from teachers that she, in turn, uses in the home.

In stark contrast to Dora’s (C) use of interpersonal skills to seek out teachers in order to her help her help her children, Esmeralda Campos (D) confided in us that she used to avoid working with her daughter on homework.

> “Hubo un tiempo en que, dice que sí hacía la tarea y yo se la firmaba, o sea, como iba al principio, o sea, se la chequeaba y ve que la había hecho y nomás se la firmaba, pero no la revisaba yo la tarea.… Y es lo que él (el maestro) dice, dice… o sea, como él me hablaba por teléfono dice: ‘Yo le hablo para que estemos en comunicación y podamos ayudar a la niña.’ Y así es como ella, … dice que ha mejorado.”

> “There was a time when, she says that she did do her homework and I would sign it, I mean, since it was only the beginning, I mean, I would check it to see that it was done and then I would just sign it, but I wouldn’t go over the homework…. And that is what he [the teacher] says, he says … I mean, since he would talk to me on the phone saying, ‘I’m talking to you so that we can be in communication and we can help your daughter.’ And that’s how she …. He says she has improved.”
> (I: Campos, 12/13/08)

While she may not have done what the teacher wanted her to do at the beginning, after receiving a call directly from the teacher, she changed her behavior, and, according to Esmeralda, her daughter was doing better. This concurs with Hoover-Dempsey (2005) and Epstein (2001) that direct invitations from teachers are an effective means for getting parents involved.

Esmeralda was, perhaps, the mother who seemed to be the most forlorn. She had little energy or enthusiasm, and always appeared to be tired and a little confused. Having said that, she was the one who contacted me after hearing that I was doing interviews and paying participants $20. I only saw her two other times at the school. She was always cordial, but did not want to spend a lot of time talking. Even though my assistant spoke to her three times by phone regarding the focus groups session, and she said that she would attend, she failed to show up on the actual day. She was definitely a detached mother. Her behavior was similar to her description of her own mother and father. They were not active in the school, and did not let her finish school because she was a girl.

As noted above and in previous chapters, there were certain behaviors that, while not engaged in by everyone, were not uncommon and might be perceived by non-immigrants as unusual. For example, in chapter five, I describe mothers who would pass food to their sons through the dismissal area fence at dismissal time before they entered the after school program. The nutritious snack that was provided by the program was insufficient, remarking one mother that he preferred “la comida de la casa” (homemade food). I noted in my field notes that this mother’s habit would have been viewed as highly irregular by my mother and others where I grew up in the Midwest.

Another example of a distinctive habit was the wearing of slippers and sweatpants, combined with uncombed hair, and a generally unkempt appearance by a number of mothers in the morning. However, this kind of behavior was not just unusual to non-immigrants. Luz Feliciano (D) commented on her distaste for this habit during our interview. Laughing at the thought of it, she said,

> "Yo a mis amigas, incluso una…. (se rió) incluso iba todo con pijama, y le digo: 'Mira, tu niña se te va a esconder, así, en lugar de decir, ella es mi mamá.' No. No. Tú, cuando vas a la escuela, vete lo más arreglada, para que la niña diga: 'Esa es mi mamá.'" Porque para los hijos todos los padres todos son bonitos. En cambio te miran en pijama, se esconden (se rió) … les da pena. Entonces y le decía a mi amiga. Y ya después iba bien arreglada, bien elegante, mi amiga a las juntas, me acompañaba, nos acompañaba."

> "To my friends, including a … (she laughed) including one went completely in pajamas, and I say to her, 'Look, your daughter's going to hide, like that, instead of saying, she is my mother.' No. No. You, when you go to school, go better dressed so that your daughter says, 'That's my mother.'" Because for one's children, all parents are beautiful. But if they see you in pajamas, they'll hide (she laughed) … it makes them feel bad. And so I told my friend. And then afterwards, she went well dressed, very elegant, my friend went to the meetings, she accompanied me, we accompanied each other."
> (I: Feliciano, 2/20/09)

This example demonstrates that Luz not only had strong ideas about the appearance of mothers at school, she also had a skill for confronting her friends and getting them to change their behavior. This skill worked well with her style of interacting with others which was friendly, yet forceful. She knew what she wanted and she was not going to take no for an answer.

However, that strong personality could also be turned against a school. During our interview, Luz (D) told us about an incident that had occurred nearly a decade before our interview when her oldest son was about to graduate from high school. She explained to us that that week before her son was going to graduate, he was sent to the office by his teacher for blowing a party favor in class. The assistant principal (AP) in charge of discipline said that he would get his diploma, but he was not going to be allowed to participate in the graduation. Luz told the AP that she did not think it was fair for him to miss out on his graduation for such a minor offense since he had never been in trouble previously. As if still feeling the pain, she told us that the AP laughed at her.

Luz then made an appointment with the principal. After notifying the secretary that she had arrived, she waited for over an hour to be called into his office. Unwilling to wait any longer, she got up and went to his office to see about the delay. When she looked into his office, she saw him there with his feet on his desk, laughing with the AP. After telling him that she had been waiting over an hour, he apologized. However, after they talked, he told her that there was nothing he could do.

Luz did not accept that answer and made two trips to the district office to garner support. The result, her son did get to participate in the graduation ceremony. Luz was still livid about all that had taken place. She said that she felt as if the school personnel were "tratando de humillarme" (trying to humble me). She was completely disillusioned with them because they all knew her and how involved she had been at the school. "Les traigo mamás, las animo a que se queden. Jamás, jamás me vuelvo a parar en una junta." (I bring you mothers, I encourage them to stay [at the meetings]. Never, never again will I ever go and take part in a school meeting.) Her personal decision to end her involvement at the school, however, was not the end of it.

> "Me enoje mucho en esa vez y hasta le dije: 'Usted va a ver que no va haber la misma audiencia, porque me voy a encargar, así como yo se la aumente, yo se la voy a quitar.' Le dije al director, 'Y tu vas a ver fotos mías, me vas a querer ver en persona, te voy a dar una foto, porque no más.'"

> "I was so angry about that and I even said to him, 'You will see that there will not be the same audience, because I am going to be in charge, in the same way that I got it to increase, I'm going to take it away.' I said to the principal, 'And you'll have to see my photo, you'll want to see me in person, I'm

> going to give you a photo, because
> never again.'"
> (I: Feliciano, 2/20/09)

Clearly, Luz's personal style and skill set could be used to benefit a school or harm it. Furthermore, the fallout from the mistreatment of a parent by school personnel at one school had a ripple effect at other schools as well.

Group Membership

Culture is often used to both distinguish as well as reinforce group membership. In addition to being members of the Orange Elementary community of parents, all of the mothers I interviewed belonged to a much larger group of individuals based on place of origin, namely Mexico, and immigration status (whether documented or undocumented, all of the mothers I interviewed were immigrants). Additionally, some were members of more specialized groups both inside and outside the school community. This section will describe some of the effects group membership had on its members and how affiliation with more groups increased the range of cultural resources that were available to those mothers.

As outlined in chapter three, I specifically chose Orange Elementary for the high concentration of Mexican immigrant families. In addition to the official demographics of the area and the school, there were numerous examples of Mexican culture being employed at the school. The most obvious example would have to be language. People naturally gravitate to the language for which they feel most comfortable. For Orange Elementary that language was Spanish. While not every parent spoke Spanish, this made clear by the occasional indignant comment by a parent if mistakenly addressed in

Spanish, “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Spanish,” possibly in an effort to distance themselves from the immigrants, the vast majority of them did (as demonstrated by school records showing that Spanish was the primary language and confirmed through my observations). School meetings were not only bilingual; they actually tended to be dominated by Spanish. A clear example of this was discussed in chapter five when a teacher on the School Site Council (SSC) was asked to respond to the principal’s impassioned explanation in Spanish of the school plan and their use of data to make decisions. She was not able to respond because as she stated, “I don’t speak Spanish so I don’t know what you already said.”

Spanish was even more evident in casual conversations around the school. Whether in the morning or the afternoon, in front of the school or on campus, Spanish was the clear language of choice amongst adults. In fact, it was unusual for me to hear two parents speaking to each other in English. While I did hear parents address children in English and even cell phone conversations in English, the face to face interactions between parents where predominantly conducted in Spanish. I would, on occasion, hear parents struggle to speak to school personnel in English, like the cafeteria manager and several of the teachers who did not speak Spanish, but even that was rare. It seemed that most parents either conversed with teachers who spoke Spanish or they avoided the conversation altogether.

Yet, the avoidance of utilizing English should not be misconstrued as timidity when it comes to language. Many mothers were not the least bit shy about their use of Spanish and their expectation that school personnel would know it. Blanca Resto (D) was not the only mother who did not think it was too much to ask that school personnel speak both English and Spanish. I met one such mother the first time I attended the Thursday Volunteers. She was looking for a mandatory parent meeting for the One-to-One Laptop program and inadvertently was sent to the resource room where the gathering was held. When she entered the room, she unabashedly asked me, possibly mistaking me for part of the school staff, in Spanish, “¿A qué hora va a terminar la reunion?” (What time is the meeting going to end?) She certainly did not feel any shame about not being able to speak in English. On the contrary, she clearly expected me to be able to speak Spanish.

It is not surprising that many immigrant mothers expected the school to be able to communicate with them in Spanish since it was not only the predominate language spoken by parents at the school, but it was also the language they heard and used in their neighborhoods and local businesses. For many, school was the one place that actually required them to use English on a regular basis.

Language, however, was not the only strategy of action indicative of Mexican culture at the site. Glimpses of Mexican culture were also evident in school events like the Christmas program. In the same way that teachers tried to distinguish the students in their class from all the rest by providing them with Santa hats or reindeer antlers, the actions of the Mexican immigrant parents distinguished their children from non-immigrant children by the way that they dressed them for the program. The mothers explained to me that it was a custom, as well as a requirement, in Mexico for parents to dress their children “de gala” (in formal attire) for special occasions like the Christmas program. The members of the audience may have worn the same clothes that they would put on at any other time of the year, but many of the girls on stage were dressed in frilly, long velvet dresses with shiny black shoes, and many of the boys were wearing vests with ties. Even economic challenges could not dissuade Mexican immigrant parents from doing what was necessary to buy the clothing that they believed was appropriate for such an event.

The mothers I interviewed also had opinions about the distinguishing characteristics of Latinos, in general, and Mexican immigrants, in particular. Doris Silva (C) told us in her interview that a problem with Mexicans was that they were “egoísta” (selfish). In her opinion, Mexicans did not want to see other Mexicans succeed. She contrasted Mexicans with Asians who she felt were more willing to work together and improve as a group. In addition to the negative competition that existed between Mexicans to which she attributed their failure to progress as a group, she also believed that American society did not want to see Mexicans succeed. Doris told us, “En realidad lo vemos que no quieren dejar que sobresalgan los Mexicanos porque saben que es un peligro para el país.” (In reality, we see it as though they [Americans] don’t want to let Mexicans succeed because they know that it is a threat to the country.) She also felt that welfare was a trap that many Mexicans fell into and were rarely able to break the chain of dependence on the government.

With regards to education, Dora Sanchez (C) told us that many Mexican immigrants did not see college as an option for them. “Ellos creen que ... que no pueden llegar … que uno del, de Mexicano, de la piel no puede llegar más que la high school.” (They believe that … that they can’t make it … that someone who is Mexican, someone of that skin [race] cannot go beyond High School.) She added, “No sé porque tienen eso en la mente pero para mí no es el punto.” (I don’t know why they think that way, but for me, that’s not the point.) She said that another belief of some Mexicans was that their children might as well get jobs because “se va a sentar y no va a poner atención” (he is just going to sit there and not pay attention).

While Elena Rodas (C) was involved in nearly every aspect of the school, she told us in her interview, “Los latinos no nos involcramos mucho en la escuela.” (We Latinos do not get involved much at school.) Like Doris (C), she, too, contrasted the behavior of Latinos with that of Asians, feeling that they were much more involved in both school and their children’s education. Dora (C), however, provided an additional perspective that must be taken into consideration. She told us that many Mexicans do not want to speak up because they are illegal and they are afraid something is going to happen to them.

In addition to the distinct cultured capacities that were the result of belonging to the large Mexican immigrant population, the connected mothers were also part of a smaller, yet distinguishable group *within the school*. I want to reiterate “within the school” because many of the strategies of action that took place “within the homes” of many of the connected and detached mothers I interviewed were identical. They checked their children’s homework, they talked about their futures, gave them “consejos” (advice), and they engaged in all of the parenting practices that will be discussed in chapter nine. There were, of course, the exceptions as we saw above in the case of Esmeralda Campos (D) who only signed her daughter’s nightly homework report without actually going over it as the teacher had asked.

First and foremost, the connected mothers, as I defined them, stood out at the school because of their constant presence. They could be found at the site in the morning, after school, at official meetings, and during school events. These mothers did not work outside the home for pay; however, they used their time and skills to not only benefit the school, but also to gain social capital. Their presence made them easily recognizable by staff and other parents alike. As we have already seen, social capital regularly facilitated the exchange of insider information and the development of cultural capacities that could be used to help their children become more successful at school.

As a result of the constant interaction between them, except for Elena Rodas (C) and, perhaps, Susana Mejia (C), the connected mothers were also connected to each other on a personal level. They were friends with one another and they hung out together, exchanging personal stories as well as advice on how to help their children be more successful. I knew just where to look in front of the resource room when I arrived for morning observations to find them, and I was rarely disappointed. This closeness also afforded them the opportunity to give and receive information on upcoming school events. Many of them told me that they did not only rely on information that came from the school. As was shown in chapter five, they would communicate with one another via social networks (Coleman, 1990), reminding and encouraging each other to attend the meetings. Elena Rodas (C) and Dora Sanches (C) also mentioned that they would invite their neighbors who did not attend school activities, but they were seldom successful.

Connected mothers were also unique in their participation and leadership positions they held in SSC and ELAC. Doris Silva (C) and Esther Muniz (C) were both voting members of the SSC, duly elected by the parents of Orange Elementary. Doris along with Elena also held leadership positions within the ELAC. All of the connected mothers attended at least some of the official meetings, including Delia Franco (C) who, during the focus group session, vociferously insisted that she did not attend any of the official meetings. My observations and the sign-in sheets indicate differently.

Additionally, connected mothers were almost universally frustrated by the lack of participation of the detached mothers. While none spoke disparagingly of anyone in particular, and they could all give reasons why some mothers did not attend official meetings and school events, namely they had to work, they also lamented that more parents were not involved.

This lack of involvement on the part of some had an impact on the school overall. At the second SSC (11/19/08), I was asked to discuss the budget crisis because the principal was not at the meeting. At one point, I told the parents that the only account that could not be frozen or swept by the district was the donations account. I then said, “Parents, we need you to help us raise funds.” The resource teacher informed me that they did not have a booster club or parent group for fundraising. SSC member, Doris Silva (C), then explained that the booster clubs ended because parent volunteers were not only concerned about how the money they raised was spent, but they were also frustrated because only a few parents participated in the fundraising activities.

Connected mothers also exhibited a greater sense of empowerment or efficacy. Whether it was the willingness of Norma Robles (C) to correct someone else’s child or Doris Silva’s (C) expectation that she would receive preferential treatment from the principal, the connected mothers felt comfortable imprinting the environment with their views on how things should be done. Even Luz Feliciano (D) demonstrated how she was willing to take things into her own hands when her son was not going to get to participate in the graduation ceremony. Not only did she get the district to change the school's behavior, but she retaliated by discouraging other mothers from attending future school meetings. It should be noted again, these mothers clearly defy any notion one might have of Mexican immigrant mothers being weak, humble "campecinas" (country folk). These mothers were empowered, and they were adept at employing strategies of action to get what they wanted.

Worldview

While similar to the first section of this chapter, worldview constitutes a much broader understanding of how the world works, and, in turn, how one should act in it. Worldviews are comprised of scientific theories, religious beliefs and folk wisdom. (Swidler, 2001). I concur with Swidler's efforts to downplay Geertz's (1973) notion of a strong cultural coherence based on one's worldview for a theory that allows for a multiplicity of beliefs so that an individual can have a set of contingency plans, so to speak, when facing new situations in an attempt to make sense of the world. In this section, I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive or complete description of Mexican immigrants' worldview, which would be beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, I will not attempt to defend or condemn the validity of the views I describe. While understanding these views, or at least recognizing that others see the world differently, is important; in the end, it does not matter if we agree or not with the view or if it can stand up to empirical data. What matters for them, and us, is that perception is reality.

A worldview held by the mothers in my study that I believe may hold insight into their relationship with U.S. schools has to do with the way that some Mexican immigrant parents viewed schools in the U.S. as compared with schools in Mexico. In 2001, I was teaching a high school Spanish class for Spanish speakers. It primarily consisted of first generation Latino immigrant students or the children of first generation immigrants who spoke Spanish fluently with their parents. One day before class, I asked several of the students what school was like in Mexico. The only thing I remember from the conversation was their insistence that schools were better in Mexico. They did not attribute any of the prosperity or development in the U.S. to the education system, but to the fact that the U.S. had so many natural resources. In 2005, speaking to Mexican immigrant mothers at the elementary school site where I had recently been assigned my first principalship, I asked them what they thought about schools in the U.S. and how they compared to schools in Mexico. Most of their responses confirmed what I had heard four years earlier. They strongly believed that Mexico has better schools than the U.S. I felt it was important to ask the parents who agreed to participate in my study about this in greater detail because, as we have seen, one's views have an impact on one's actions.

What I found was an overwhelming amount of evidence that the majority of Mexican immigrant mothers that I spoke with believed that elementary and secondary schools were better in Mexico than the U.S. Furthermore, as we shall see, those areas that they conceded as being better in the U.S. than in Mexico had little to do with teaching and learning and everything to do with the amount of free services and materials that schools provided. My initial questioning on the subject took place during the personal interviews. I then pressed them further during the focus group sessions to clearly articulate their views and give me concrete examples. While the mothers were not always able to come to a consensus on the other topics we discussed at the focus group sessions, there were few dissonant voices on this issue. Furthermore, it was the mothers who were the most connected that were also the most critical of the schools.

The first mother I formally interviewed, Elena Rodas (C) found it difficult to compare the school systems now, but she was clear on one thing, “en tiempo atrás era mucho mejor, la educación era mejor en México” (in the past the education was much better, it was better in Mexico). She then described to us how she knew of children that came to the U.S. from Mexico who were much farther along in math, especially algebra, than their American counterparts. When I asked her what had changed to diminish the Mexican schools in her eyes, she did not make reference to the level of education, but the security of the students due to the drug violence and the cost of the schools. In fact, if money had not been an issue, she said that she would have preferred that her children study in Mexico. This was what one of the most connected and involved Mothers at Orange Elementary believed.

However, Elena was not alone. SSC and ELAC member Doris Silva (C) also felt that schools were better in Mexico. While she admitted that schools were more advanced in the U.S. than in Mexico, she did not equate advancement with improvement. She told us, “Hay muchos sistemas que no son los correctos en mi punto de vista.” (There are many systems that are not the correct ones in my point of view.) This was her point of view, her worldview, and the U.S. educational system could present her with all the advancements in the world and it would not have made any difference unless they were able to address her areas of concern. Doris felt that schools were better in Mexico because, “En México, por el punto de que hay más respeto hacia los maestros. Se enfocan más en que los hijos salgan bien de sus grados.” (In Mexico, for the fact that there is more respect for the teachers. They focus more on getting the children to come out better in their grade [levels].) Doris then described how students in the U.S. were promoted from grade to grade without knowing how to read or do math. We will hear more from her below.

Susana Mejia (C) also admitted that she thought that schools were better in Mexico, but she wondered, “no sé si será porque estudié allá, pero lo que yo miro que aprende uno mejor.” (I don’t know if it’s because I studied there, but from what I can see one learns more [there].) Susana did, however, like the fact that students received free laptops at Orange Elementary in fifth and sixth grades. Yet, at the same time, she felt that schools in the U.S. used too many tools and devices, like calculators, to find answers rather than making students use their minds.

Susana raised an interesting point that only one other mother mentioned. She was aware that her ability to judge fairly may have been impacted by her own positive experiences studying in Mexican schools. However, no mother every raised the possibility that they may not have fully understood the U.S. school system due to a language barrier or lack of experience. Once again, world view is not dependent upon empirical data. These mothers knew what they knew, and it guided their strategies of action.

Yet not all mothers were as clear about the comparisons. Another SSC member, Esther Muniz (C), initially told us that she could not say which country had better schools. She seemed to feel that both had strengths and weaknesses. As with many of the mothers, she did like the fact that “Aquí le ofrecen libros, todo el material prácticamente, y en México todo lo tienen que comprar.” (Here they offer you books, practically all of the materials, and in Mexico you have to buy everything.) This neutral view changed dramatically in favor of the schools in Mexico during the focus group session. We held the personal interview in Esther’s home and she was one of the least forthcoming with her answers. She appeared much more relaxed and opinionated when she was answering questions with other mothers.

Carmen Santos (C) was the youngest mother we interviewed. She had two young children, and, even though she only went to school through the sixth grade, she felt that it was important for her to be a positive influence on her children’s education. Her parents had been involved in her schooling, but she had to drop out because of the cost. She found it difficult to compare the two systems, but tended to feel that schools were better in Mexico, especially if you did your best. Although like Susana, she, too, wondered if her views were affected by her experiences attending Mexican schools. “Será que nomás estudie allá? [se ríe] A lo mejor sí.” (Could it be that I only studied there? [She laughs]. Maybe so.)

None of these connected mothers felt that schools were better in the U.S. Initially, several were unsure, that is, until they participated in the focus group session for the connected mothers. When I posed the question to them as a group, Norma Robles (C) started off the discussion by saying, “Yo pienso que no hay escuelas malas, hay estudiantes malos.” (I think that there are no bad schools, there are bad students.) This caused Esther Muniz (C) to laugh. Dora Sanchez (C) then added, “Ni hay maestros malos.” (Nor are their bad teachers.) While both Norma and Dora were strong voices in the group, their positive comments were to be the last. Doris Silva (C) immediately replied, “Pero para mí, para mí, mi punto de vista pienso que en México hay mejor educación, porque exigen más, como maestro exigen más.” (But for me, for me, my point of view, I think that in Mexico the education is better because they demand more, the teacher demands more.)

The entire group immediately began to discuss the high standards set by Mexican schools for their students and the way that students in the U.S. were not pushed to achieve but were promoted regardless of their grades or abilities. Furthermore, the mothers gave examples of how students coming from Mexico were more advanced than their counterparts in the U.S. Norma shared how her nephews told her, “Tía, lo que entramos a ver, ya lo vimos allá.” (Aunt, what we are just starting to see, we already saw it there.)

Not only did they feel that students coming to the U.S. from Mexico were more advanced than their American counterparts, they also felt that the teachers were able to teach more in Mexico because they were not limited by a set curriculum. Doris explained,

> “Cada maestro de resultados de exámenes y todo, pero no es una regla estricta. Así que ellos pueden enseñar más. O sea, si un maestro sabe diferente que el libro, él lo enseña….Yo pienso que es mejor porque los niños sobresalen más. Aquí nada más un ritmo, ‘Ay, no me puedo pasar porque ya complete esta lección y ya.’”

> “Each teacher gives results for the tests and everything, but it is not a strict rule. This way they can teach more. I mean, if a teacher knows something different from the book, he teaches it…. I think it is better because the children are more successful. Here it is just a routine, ‘Oh, I can’t pass because I already completed the lesson and that’s it.’” (Focus Group Connected, 1/15/09)

Doris later made it clear that a teacher in Mexico “tiene la capacidad” (has the capacity) to make changes to a lesson when a student is falling behind while a teacher in the U.S. only knows how to follow the book.

Esther quickly added further proof that the teachers were not prepared to teach in the U.S. by saying, “Y aquí las maestras las envían a entrenamientos ya estando aquí dando clases.” (And here, the teachers are sent to trainings even though they are already giving classes.) This seemed to demonstrate that teachers were not properly prepared before being appointed as teachers. The situation was made even worse by the fact that when the teachers were at trainings, substitute teachers had to be appointed to cover their classes.

No parent attempted to defend the practice of professional development or saw any need for it, unless, of course, a teacher was unprepared for the classroom which on its face was a problem. The majority of these comments were made by Doris and Esther, members of the SSC. They, supposedly, had been at the meetings when all of the school plans and expenditures were approved. These comments were by mothers who were supposed to know more about the process than any others.

Next, Dora Sanchez (C), a mother who initially had thought that schools were better in the U.S., told the group that after talking to a friend of hers following our interview that she had changed her mind. Her friend had told her about her two older daughters and that they found students in the U.S. to be way behind them. She, too, now believed that schools were better in Mexico.

As the focus group progressed, the connected mothers agreed that what made the Mexican schools better than U.S. schools was the following:

1) They demand more from their students
2) They spend more time on a lesson
3) Overall better system
4) Better way of teaching mathematics
5) Teachers had greater freedom to do what they thought was best
6) Teachers in the U.S. go to too many trainings.

They also said, and all agreed upon, that even though schools were inferior in the U.S., they did do a better job teaching their children English, and, therefore, the students had a better opportunity for getting a good job afterwards. In fact, the connected parents all agreed that they would have preferred to have had their children study in Mexican schools if only they could have been assured that their children would learn English well enough to return here and get a good job. They did not even retreat when I suggested that they were admitting to “sacrificando” (sacrificing) their child’s education all for the chance to learn English. This certainly seems to poke holes in the idea that some Mexicans come to the U.S. and do not want to learn English. In fact, it is just the opposite. These immigrants came so that their children could learn English, and, one day, get better paying jobs. At the same time, it is quite clear that these connected mothers did not choose to come to the U.S. for the schools.

The disconnected mothers had many similar views regarding education in the U.S. and Mexico with several distinct differences. When I asked Miriam Lopez (D), a young mother of two, where she thought the schools were better, she told us,

"Pues, yo pienso que … aquí es mejor, porque aquí tiene uno mucha oportunidad de estar con los hijos … y aprender con ellos y en México no. Allá en México, nomás, allá, vete a la escuela. Allí, está, ándale."	"Well, I think that … here is better, because here one has the chance to be with one's children … and learn with them, and in Mexico, no. There in Mexico, you only get, there, go to the school. There it is, get going." (I: Lopez, 12/13/08)

While she said that she thought schools were better in the U.S., her reasons had nothing to do with the educational system and more to do with the lifestyle that she had living in the U.S. When asked more specifically about school subjects, she felt that schools in the U.S. made the materials "más dificultosa" (more difficult) than in Mexico. Mexican schools made it easier to learn.

Like Miriam, Blanca Resto (D) also began by saying that she thought schools were better in the U.S., but her explanation offers little support to U.S. schools.

"Mire, es mejor aquí porque … principalmente empiezan a aprender el inglés los niños, tienen el desayuno en la mañana, ahhh…. Pero es mejor en México, porque a mí se me hace que en México enseñan más que aquí. Supongamos en matemáticas, no es que sea mejor, sino es que va más avanzado, o sea se avanza más en México que aquí."	"Look, it is better here because … primarily the children, they begin to learn English, and they have breakfast in the morning, ahhh … But it is better in Mexico, because to me it seems that in Mexico they teach more than here. If we were to look at math, it's not that it's better, but rather it's that it is more advanced, I mean, they go further in Mexico than here." (I: Resto, 2/17/09)

Here we see that, according to Blanca, schools in the U.S. are good because, first and foremost, they teach English, but she added something that none of the connected mothers ever mentioned, namely free breakfast.

Ana Fuentes (D) also mentioned breakfast when describing why schools in the U.S. were better. “Aquí hay mucha atención para los niños. Que se preocupan hasta que los niños desayunen bien. Y en México, no. El que desayuna bien y él que no, no.” (Here they pay a lot of attention to the children. They are even concerned that the children eat a good breakfast. And in Mexico, no. He who eats a good breakfast [eats] and the one who doesn’t, doesn’t.) When pressed on academic issues, she, like the others, believed that children learned “más” (more) in Mexico.

Diana Salcedo (D), a weary mother of four, never would say which system was better. However, she did not like the fact that students often went to school in Mexico “sin desayunar” (without eating breakfast). As was stated above, Diana was married to a former teacher in Mexico. They both felt that schools in the U.S. gave too much homework. She also said that “aquí todo es individual” (here everything is individual). She said that schools in America were always pushing parents. If the child did not do well on a test the teacher would call. If a student missed a day, the school wanted to know why. She said that in Mexico, “ni le preguntan por el niño” (they don’t even ask you about your child).

At the focus group session for detached mothers, when I asked where the better schools were, Blanca immediately shouted out “México … Ahhhh!” and then laughed. The ensuing discussion resulted in an additional two items in the U.S. column, namely smaller class sizes and instructional aides, while Mexico, once again, ran away with the prize. While the detached mothers did not make as strong a statement about the dominance of Mexican schools as the connected mothers, the list made it clear which they preferred. The following items appeared in the column for Mexican schools;

1) They move at a faster pace even when class size is 50:1
2) Students are retained until they know the grade level materials (no social promotion)
3) Better way of teaching mathematics (same as connected)
5) There were more social activities
6) The schools were more motivating; they gave more gifts.

Several detached mothers also mentioned things that they did not like about U.S. schools. They felt that there was too much homework, something the connected mothers always seemed to want more of for their children. They felt as though teachers only gave the students examples of what they were supposed to do, but then expected the parents to do the work in the home. Some also thought that teachers in the U.S. had too many teacher supplemental materials. Like the connected mothers, they felt that teachers did not have the freedom to do a good job because of the overabundance of teacher books. One thing that the detached mothers said that was not said during the connected focus group was that the items listed under the Mexican schools, “Sí, pueden funcionar aquí” (Yes, they can work here).

Summary

This chapter explored the cultured capacities that some Mexican immigrant mothers possessed and utilized in order to construct strategies of action that both made sense to them and they were able to carry out. I was able to show that there was a surprisingly similar set of cultural resources for both connected and detached immigrant mothers from Mexico. What separated one parent from another were not the cultured capacities, but rather the strategies of actions they chose to employ. This chapter explored the cultured capacities of these individuals in four broad categories.

The first category focused on how thoughts and feelings were utilized to fashion a particular kind identity. We saw how some connected mothers actively engaged in cultural work by choosing strategies of action with regards to their children's formal education that were shaped by their views of self and who they wanted to be while others, namely detached mothers, did not. I also asserted that that a key to understanding the contradictory views expressed in the literature as to whether or not Latinos value education may actually be the result of a thin line of action that separated some of the connected mothers from the rest. While all mothers thought that education was important, the thoughts and feelings of several connected mothers seemed to have developed into what might best be described as a new worldview. For them, it was not enough to simply think or feel that education was important; their strategies of action were continually being guided by these thoughts. It was if the formal education of their children had become a driving force in their lives.

Next, I analyzed their skills, styles, and habits that were the most frequently accessed when choosing strategies of action. I showed that while immigrant parents did not always utilize the cultured capacities available to them, such as asking questions during a meeting, these reservations did not stop some of them from consistently attending educational events at school so that they could improve their skills for helping their children do better at school. They were willing to learn new cultured capacities and they were willing to practice them so that they would become skilled strategies of action.

I also showed how a parent's personal style and skill set could be used to benefit a school or harm it. Furthermore, the fallout from the mistreatment of a parent by school personnel at one school had a ripple effect at other schools as well.

This was followed by a description of group membership and how affiliation with a greater number of groups increased the range of cultural resources that were available to an individual. In addition to being part of the school community, all of the mothers I interviewed belonged to a larger group of individuals based on their place of origin, namely Mexico, and their immigration status. While language was the primary characteristic noted, customs at special events, like Christmas, as well as within group competitiveness were also discussed. It was shown that not only did connected mothers have additional cultured capacities, but they were more adept at using them.

Finally, there was overwhelming evidence that the majority of Mexican immigrant mothers that I spoke with believed that schools were better in Mexico than the U.S. Furthermore, those areas that they conceded as being better in the U.S. than in Mexico had little to do with teaching and learning and everything to do with the amount of free services and materials that schools provided. In addition, it was the mothers who were the most connected that were also the most critical of the schools in the U.S. Yet how does this provocative finding help us to understand their behaviors?

CHAPTER 7

External Constraints on Culture

In the previous chapter, we looked at the cultured capacities or "tools" that a select group of Mexican immigrant mothers possessed and were able to utilize in order to construct the strategies of actions we discussed in chapter five. Yet the availability of these tools was not the only influence that shaped their decisions to carry out a particular line of action. Swidler (2001) describes how one's own inner culture can have a "powerful *causal* influence on action" (emphasis added) when it is united with other external or societal processes such as codes, contexts, and institutions that are able to systematize cultural meanings and mediate their influence on actions (p. 161). In this chapter, we will analyze these external constraints on culture at Orange Elementary.

Codes

At a school, educators, namely teachers and administrators, are viewed by many Latinos as experts or specialists when it comes to schooling (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). I was interested in discovering whether or not the educators at Orange Elementary were actively promoting any particular cultural conceptions relating to education, and, if they were, how did the school's views compare with those of the parents. Swidler (2001) describes how actions can be influenced by widely disseminated semiotic codes, or "systems of meaning that define what our actions will mean to others" (p. 179), when they become part of the cultural resources available to the public. An individual's decision to choose a course of action may be based upon how certain actions will be perceived by others rather than a deeply held belief. You may recall the example given in chapter two regarding an individual’s decision to give Christmas gifts because of how the action (or inaction) might be judged by others rather than on a deeply held belief in the custom. Swidler writes, “Well-publicized cultural codes redirect action by reframing its meaning” (p.7). The influence of cultural codes over behavior is especially powerful in the public arena where it is more difficult to control how one’s behavior may be defined by others.

At Orange Elementary, Cristina Noche, the principal, was clearly the most visible person at the site and the one best positioned to disseminate school messages and create a climate in which parents would feel comfortable participating (Epstein, 1986; Comer, 1994). Furthermore, she was also the individual who could best publicize new cultural codes and redirect action by reframing its meaning if she wanted a change in parental behavior at the site. However, as we saw in chapter five, if she said anything, Mrs. Noche mainly used school events to repeat previously disseminated school procedures or to make announcements concerning upcoming events. At official meetings, both Mrs. Noche and Mrs. Gabela, the resource teacher, closely followed the district generated agendas in order to be compliant. When Mrs. Noche did stray from the script, most often she used the time for personal stories or to reiterate, once again, the school procedures.

Perhaps the best example of this was Back-to-School Night. For nearly 30 minutes, Mrs. Noche presented a laundry list of school procedures during one of the school’s largest parent gatherings in the school year, touching on everything from parking instructions to the school’s lost and found. While every parent and student needed to know these procedures, they had already been sent home in both English and

Spanish in the *Parent/Student Handbook 2008-2009*. Mrs. Noche's inability to control the noise level and behaviors of a significant percentage of the audience was a clear indication that she had no more success communicating her message in oral form than she had previously achieved in writing. What she did not present was a vision for the school and a message about the importance of education or instructions on how they could help their children become more successful academically.

The principal's decision to not articulate a clear vision and message for the school was somewhat offset by her actions at the end of her presentation. Mrs. Noche modeled her respect and appreciation for teachers by introducing them, giving them a bouquet of flowers, and then asking for the audience to give them a round of applause. While her message was not explicit, it was nonetheless powerful. Parents and students alike were shown one way of honoring teachers. The result, after years of enactment, many families also brought flower bouquets to give to their child's teacher. The semiotic code was clear; giving flowers to a teacher is a sign of respect and appreciation. Of course, it is no great revelation that giving flowers to someone is a symbol of caring, but this example is significant in that Back-to-School Night took place the third week of school. Students could have given flowers to their teachers on any of the previous days. They chose, however, to do it on that special evening, in front of others, in the same way that the principal had done it for years. Parents, students, and teachers all understood the meaning behind the flowers. Furthermore, as with giving gifts at Christmas, the true feelings and beliefs of the ones engaged in the giving did not matter. What did matter was how the act was perceived by others. I might add that I do not engage in this tradition at the school where I am principal, and almost no one brings flowers to the teachers during Back-to-School Night.

This example demonstrates that a semiotic code can be effective for modifying behavior if modeled in front of a large group. We also saw in chapter five that behavior could be modified when given as an explicit message. On the second evening of the Christmas program, the manners of the audience were markedly different from the first. Instead of parents getting up and leaving after their child performed as they had done the first night, pushing their way through the packed audience as they made their way to the door; on the second night, parents waited until all of the students had performed before exiting the cafeteria.

The change may have been the result of two clear messages that were only disseminated at the second evening's performance. First, the written program that was distributed during the second evening included the admonition at the bottom of the page, in both English and Spanish, to "Please pick up your child in his/her classroom at the end of the last performance." Second, Mrs. Noche explicitly told the parents to take note of the message at the bottom of the program, reiterating that they were supposed to pick up their children "at the end of the last performance." When parents were given clear directives on what they were to do, almost everyone complied. The audience was not just told to be "respectful." That was something that occurred during the first evening with little effect. The second evening, the audience was given specific information on what a respectful audience looked like. Mrs. Noche redefined what it *meant* to leave before the end of the program and everyone heard it. The message was widely publicized, and, as a result, even if people had wanted to leave early, by doing so, they risked being labeled as disrespectful and rude by the other parents who also heard the principal’s message. This was clearly part of their cultured capacities because it was acted upon immediately without any additional reminders.

The requirements of the One-to-One Laptop program were another example of a widely disseminated code that seemed quite effective for improving participation and connection with the school. This clearly articulated message began with technology personnel from the district office at the initial distribution of the computers to the students and their parents. In fact, the parents had to sign a contract stating that they understood the requirements as well as the consequences for failure to comply. The need for 10 hours of volunteer time at the school annually was then repeated at the school and reinforced with a school developed “passport” to record parent hours. At the end of each official meeting, even though the principal and resource teacher often failed to mention it, parents would approach them to get official signatures, verifying their participation. Parents were especially proactive in their involvement under the One-To-One program because, in addition to a clearly articulated message, the consequences were the loss of the computer.

However, not all district messages were as successfully implemented or reinforced. Even though Mrs. Noche and the school leadership team had been trained on the district wide strategies known as Shared Decision Making (SDM) to improve the effectiveness of official meetings, they did not implement them consistently at Orange Elementary. This was most clearly seen in their failure to follow the primary strategy which consisted of jointly developing meeting “norms” to specify the desired behaviors of all participants during meetings. Even though the district required norms for all official meetings that took place anywhere in the district, Orange Elementary did not use them. The school did have clearly articulated norms for staff meetings, but they were not mentioned at any ELAC or SSC meetings. The result, as we saw in chapter five, meetings were poorly run and ineffective. Unlike the consequences that went along with the district’s One-to-One Laptop message, the requirements for SDM were only a mandate without any monitoring or consequences.

Interestingly, in my interview with Mrs. Noche on my final day at the site, she told me, “I always try to give a message to our parents.” She told me that the school tried to instill good morals and values in the students that she felt were lacking. While I do not doubt that this was something she wanted to do, while I was at the site, she never gave any message to parents and I never heard her address the morals and values of the students or community at large. As had been the case when I asked about the SSC and ELAC agendas and she had told me that they were always posted, here, too, Mrs. Noche talked about actions taking place at the school that just were not so.

Mrs. Noche’s failure to articulate a message does not mean that she did not try to redefine behavior. When no school board members showed up for Back-to-School Night, she told the audience that the board members had been invited, and one had replied that she could not be present at their event due to an awards ceremony that she had to attend. Mrs. Noche frequently talked to me about board members attending events at her school, always being careful to explain to me why some or all were unable to attend. She did not want anyone thinking that her school was unimportant. For her, school board members represented prestige, and their presence at an event meant a transfer of that prestige to her. While perhaps not as desirable, a valid excuse for not attending an event at least provided a small token of the respect she seemed to long-for.

Mrs. Noche's failure to articulate a clear vision for parents was later repeated in all but one of the classroom presentations given by teachers that I observed in my time at Orange Elementary. Whether it was Back-to-School night, Family Literacy Night, or Family Math Night, teachers almost seemed dumbfounded when it came to starting a session with parents present. Whether by choice or by happenstance, teachers mimicked what they saw in their principal, from the weak openings to the ambiguous closings. Other than SSC members, teachers only saw Mrs. Noche in front of a parent group during school events. While I was at the site, they never observed a rousing example of clear communication with parents and a carefully articulated message by their leader. Neither the principal nor the teachers took advantage of the opportunities to widely publicize semiotic codes that could have changed parent behaviors and improved the home-school connections.

Contexts

One's actions are also influenced by the context. "Culture's effects are strongest when the context demands and enforces public cultural coherence" (Swidler, 2001, p. 169). One's cultural beliefs and their influence on behavior can be intensified when one is faced with a personal or societal crisis. A crisis provides a context that magnifies the influence of culture on behavior, forcing individuals to choose sides or abandon beliefs and behaviors were once tolerated. For some, achievement gaps between and within minority groups and middle-class White and Asian students may present just such a contextual crisis. For others, the wave of immigration from Latin America may require that choices be made as to which side one supports and how one chooses to act in the face of a changing social landscape.

Stakeholders at Orange Elementary faced both of these challenges. You may recall from chapter three that during the 2008-09 school year, there were approximately 565 students at the school of which 94.7% were Latino and 46.2% were classified as ELL (English Language Learner) with an additional 23.9% classified as Fluent English Proficient (meaning they entered school speaking a language other than English and were either initially classified as fluent in English or were redesignated as fluent in English after meeting certain state and district criteria). The primary language of the vast majority of immigrant parents was Spanish, and the majority of them were from Mexico. Additionally, more than 85% of the students received free or reduced lunch, the primary indicator for determining SED status. All of these figures were well above the district and state averages.

Additionally, while Orange Elementary was not categorized by NCLB as being Program Improvement at the time, the school was not doing well academically. In 2008, the school failed to meet federal accountability requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and the school fell nine points in their state Academic Performance Index (API) to 704 (38 points below the state average and 44 points below the district average). The school failed to make adequate growth in 2009, becoming the lowest achieving Elementary school in the district, as well as falling into Program Improvement with additional requirements and sanctions by the federal government.

In spite of these statistics, the data I collected at the site paint a surprisingly static picture of the context in which culture was brought to bear on these families' actions. One might assume that a school with such high rates for almost every indicator of potential school failure, coupled with dropping test scores, would have parents that are up in arms about the situation and determined to make changes. This was not the case.

The mothers I interviewed either did not mention any of these categories as being areas of concern, or, if they did mention them, they were not sure about the meaning. For example, when asked about the reputation of the school, parents and staff alike stated that Orange Elementary had a good reputation. Several mothers mentioned that the school had dropped in its points, but when I asked them what that meant, they only said that they had heard that somewhere and did not know any more about it. As we saw in chapter six, several mothers contrasted the success of Asians over Latinos, but gaps in achievement were not the focus of their comments, but rather, the willingness of Asians to work together as a group and get involved in their children's education as compared with Latinos who did not want to see other Latinos get ahead.

Furthermore, the homogeneity of the school and community helped mask the gaps in achievement. Orange Elementary did not have a significant population of Asian or White students on their campus with which to make academic comparisons. The community itself was predominantly Latino, so even talk about Asian success was based more on stereotypes and hearsay rather than personal experience. Parents certainly did not receive any information about gaps in achievement from the principal or its teachers. Even Mrs. Noche told SSC members that they were to report “good things” about the school. If parents were going to discover information about the academic standing of the school or the notion of gaps in achievement, they were going to have to discover it on their own. This was something that the mothers I spoke to had never done.

While talking about possible future actions one might take if a school was doing poorly, Dora Sanchez (C) said to us, “Si yo veo que está mal, entonces, yo sí saco a mis hijos y me los llevo para otra escuela.” (If I see that it’s bad, then I would take them out and I would bring them to another school.) She also told us that up to that point she had never had a problem at the school, and her children always had good teachers and were doing well. Dora was the mother who used her social skills to get additional homework and study aides for her children from the teachers. Her strategy of action to ensure the success of her children was to get out in front and carefully guide and monitor her children’s academic growth. Her children may or may not have had “good” teachers, but Dora’s actions precluded her from discovering that they were falling behind academically after it was too late.

Similarly, the homogeneity of the area also meant that parents were not confronted on a daily basis at school with issues of ethnoracial identity and immigration status. Parents who studied in the U.S. were in the minority at Orange Elementary, and the immigrant parents, who were in the majority, seemed quite comfortable in the school setting. When asked what they thought were the greatest problems facing young people today, racism was not on the list. For several mothers, they did not know how to respond, “No sé” (I don’t know). A few talked about drugs and violence while others mentioned getting involved with the wrong kinds of friends. Many mentioned the economic crisis and their fear of a spouse losing a job or having to work two jobs. Only one mother, Blanca Resto (D), said that she feared being picked up by immigration because “no tengo papeles” (I don’t have papers). Yet, even here, this was a general fear rather than one related specifically to school.

For the parents and students at Orange Elementary, it seemed that the homogeneity of the school population and the community worked as a buffer to protect them from some of the contextual crises they might otherwise have faced. The relatively static environment they experienced may also have kept them from contending with the important academic issues that were present at the school.

The Institution

Swidler (2001) asserts that institutions influence culture in two ways. First, many life strategies and cultured capacities for action are determined by institutional demands. Action only makes sense when one considers the limitations placed on an individual by the multiple institutions, everything from marriage to public education, or even the various aspects of any one institution. Second, institutions are also able to influence behavior by creating the basis for a shared culture, not based on indoctrination, but on “the common dilemmas institutional life poses in a given society” (p. 176). Compulsory education in a country where public schooling is the norm, especially for those who are economically disadvantaged, becomes the basis for a common culture.

However, what happens when an immigrant attempts to utilize cultured capacities that were acquired in the native country to participate in a new institutional arena which only appears similar? “The sense of cultural disjointedness one feels in moving to or through a foreign culture is primarily a sense of the misfit between one’s cultural expectations and an alien set of institutions” (Swidler, 2001, p. 177). Many of the comments used in describing the worldview of the Mexican immigrant mothers I interviewed in chapter six are examples of this sense of “cultural disjointedness” they experienced when they attempted to use their previously successful strategies of action to navigate an educational system that, while appearing quite similar, required a different set of cultured capacities in order to pass through it successfully. This section will begin to address why certain cultural norms were followed almost universally, like daily start times and ingress and egress procedures, and why other norms, such as volunteering at school and attending school meetings, were only followed by a handful of parents.

The school campus is both a physical and organizational place where individuals from a variety of cultural traditions are forced to come together to work towards a common goal, namely, the formal education of children even when the meaning of that goal varies widely. The school, as an institution, represents the greater society and provides both the structure that limits not only the material and social environments but also what can be thought and said (Swidler, 2001). This is often in stark contrast to the cultural resources that are brought to school by immigrant parents and their children.

We will begin our analysis of the institution by considering the impact of the school’s physical structure on the parent’s strategies of action. As was shown in chapter five, Orange Elementary’s campus coupled with the school’s procedures played a significant role in the ability of parents to choose lines of action from the cultured capacities available to them. As noted previously, the well-maintained campus created an initial positive response by anyone approaching the school. The front of the school not only appeared park-like, but it was used by some parents in the afternoon, fathers in particular, in the same way that one would use a park, including picnic lunches. And while there were almost no conversations in the front of the school in the morning, the front of the school was a popular gathering place for mothers in the afternoon as they waited to pick up their children from school. On the other hand, the limited parking available to parents and staff alike was occasionally the source of conflict as well as a possible unintentional message that parents and visitors were not welcomed. Whether they felt welcomed or not, parents learned to walk to school events.

The security fence around the entire perimeter of the school also served as a dividing line between the school and the community. The main gate, located near the door to the front office, and the dismissal gate, located alongside the sidewalk closest to the street, were the primary ingress-egress points to the school. They also became the primary hubs of parent activity. I never observed a parent attempt to enter through the main teacher gate located at the back side of the school’s southern parking lot or the secondary teacher gate which was located near the kindergarten wing. Parental behavior was constrained by the physical campus as well as the school policy which further limited parental access points.

The dismissal area was a newly implemented strategy by the school to improve the egress of students from the campus. A fenced in area at the front of the school was the center of attention as students finished the school day. Parents carved out their spots along the fence with a concentration of parents at the dismissal gate that was further controlled by a duty aide who limited the entrance of parents, and as a consequence, the access of parents to teachers. We saw that while the potential for access to teachers by parents existed, it was severely, if not completely, limited in practice. Parents who were connected often utilized their influence and familiarity with the campus, procedures, and even personnel to bypass these barriers. Disengaged parents, however, while familiar with the procedures, rarely took advantage of their options. The challenging task of interacting with a teacher who may or may not know Spanish was made nearly impossible by the physical barrier. It was just easier to not even try.

This procedure was completely reversed at the start of school. Parents were allowed to enter the campus through the main gate in the mornings during the open campus time period before the start of the school day. Once on campus, they discovered that they were barred from entering the cafeteria, the classrooms (without an invitation), certain hallways, and the playground, but had the freedom to roam anywhere else. The size of the campus allowed parents to pick and choose favorite locations, such as the connected mothers congregating at the benches in front of the resource room or a large contingency of mothers at the entrance/exit to the cafeteria where their children were eating breakfast. If the weather turned foul and it began to rain, the space became quite limited as parents were forced to only occupy those hallways that were covered. The times and procedures for parent behavior during the open campus were further restricted by school policies that were never breached while I was present.

The size of two specific areas of the campus also served to limit the number of parents that could participate at the school. The resource room, which also doubled as the parent volunteer room, only had space for about 20 adults. This was never a problem while I was at the site as the number of volunteers was never larger than a dozen mothers. However, if more parents had wanted to be involved, the resource room would have been woefully insufficient. The cafeteria, while much larger, was also limited to a maximum of 235 people by the fire marshal. Unlike the resource room that always had at least a few open seats, the cafeteria was filled to capacity during Back-to-School Night and both Winter Program performances. This impacted parent behavior primarily by forcing those wanting a seat to arrive early, but the crowded environment and poor acoustics also resulted in a great deal of distracting noise and a diminished social experience. Furthermore, during the Winter Program, the limited lighting gave an increased amount of anonymity to those seated or standing in the back of the cafeteria, further increasing the volume of their conversations and distracting behaviors.

The physical structure of the school, however, was not the only institutional element that had an impact on the skills and habits of the parents. There were also several key organizational components that shaped the actions of parents. As was noted above, several physical elements such as the dismissal area and the open campus were coupled with school organizational procedures that impacted the behavior of parents. Yet, there were other school practices that had an effect on parent behavior apart from the physical confines of the campus.

Procedures regarding language were perhaps the most widespread. The school operated by the principle that everything that was sent home to parents had to be in both English and Spanish. Furthermore, all official meetings and school events were also conducted in both languages. For those teachers who did not speak Spanish, translators were provided by the school when necessary. These procedures worked perfectly for the connected mothers, but were not always as successful with the detached ones. Connected mothers almost universally commented that language was not a problem for them at Orange Elementary. They were quite familiar with the flyers and information that was sent home by the school and they had attended enough meetings to know that meetings were all translated into Spanish. They also knew about, and felt comfortable asking for, assistance from a school translator when necessary.

The only exception to this was when Delia Franco (C) forcefully said at the connected focus group session that "hay veces" (there are times) when everything is not translated into Spanish. She added,

> "¿De qué sirve venir a una junta y la mayor parte está en inglés? … A veces se desespera uno. Porque, ¿cómo, si yo no sé hablar en inglés, cómo yo voy a ir con una directora que habla puro inglés? ¿Cómo voy a comunicar?"

> "What's the value of coming to a meeting and the majority of it is in English? … At times, one becomes desperate. Because how, if I don't know how to speak in English, how am I going to go up to a principal that only speaks in English? How am I going to communicate?
> (Focus Group Connected: 1/15/09)

In a general sense, Delia's point is well taken. It would be very difficult for a parent to approach a principal who did not speak her language. However, this was not the case at Orange Elementary. The principal, the resource teacher, the office manager, the duty aides, and a large number of teachers at the site all spoke Spanish. For the next five or six minutes, the other connected mothers gave example after example of how translation was provided by the school at meetings. However, Delia never conceded the point. The most she would admit to was, "no se traducen bien" (they don't translate well).

Several minutes later, we all discovered that the reason for Delia's anger and unwillingness to back down stemmed from a recent problem she had experienced at the high school where her daughter was attending. She told us, "Eso es lo único que dicen. 'Oh, … viene la directora' con la cara fresco. 'Sorry man, so sorry.' No es 'sorry.' Tengo 40 minutos que estoy esperándola." (That is the only thing they say. 'Oh, … here comes the principal' as if nothing is wrong. 'Sorry man, so sorry.' It isn't 'sorry.' I've been waiting for her for 40 minutes.) As with the negative incident Luz Feliciano (D) had experienced at her oldest son's high school when he was about to graduate, profoundly impacting her participation at all schools, here we see, once again, that a negative experience at one institution (school) colors one's perception of all institutions (schools).

Unlike the connected mothers, many of the detached mothers may have sided with Delia with regards to language. Blanca Resto (D), for example, felt that language was one of the most important issues deterring her from participating at the school. You may recall that she did not understand why all teachers could not be required to know Spanish. She, however, was not alone in these feelings. Diana Salcedo (D), a mother of four who seemed very unsure of herself and the life she was living in the U.S., told the detached mothers at the their focus groups session that she found it very difficult to communicate with her fourth grade daughter's teachers.

> "Yo tengo muchos problemas para comunicarme con ella porque no sé el inglés con esa maestro. Ya nomás la veo, y ya siento que me está comiendo con la mirada de que 'Ay, ay viene esta señora.' Pero no le puedo decir nada. Tengo tantas cosas de preguntarle pero no puedo. Entonces siempre me retiro."

> "I have so many problems communicating with her because I don't know English with that teacher. I just see her, and I already feel as though she is eating me up with her stare as if to say 'Ay, ay, here comes that woman. But I can't say anything to her. I have so many things to ask her but I can't. So I always just leave."
> (Focus Group Detached: 2/23/09)

Not only did Diana have problems communicating with the teacher due to the inability of each to speak the other's language, she also attached negative feelings to the way she saw the teacher looking at her. "Ya nomás la veo, y siento que me está comiendo con la mirada." (I just see her, and I already feel as though she is eating me up with her stare.)

Laura Rodriquez (D), the mother who had tried to attend the Family Math Night after receiving a call from her sister-in-law Celia Lemus (C), also encountered problems communicating with her child's teacher. "Pues yo digo, como, por ejemplo, nosotros como inmigrantes, si no hablamos en inglés y si las conferencias son en inglés, pues, decimos, pues, para que vamos si de todos modos no entendemos." (Well, I say, like, for example, how are we as immigrants, if we don't speak English and if the conferences are in English, well, we say, well, why should we go if we don't understand each other anyways.) One of Laura's strategies of action for dealing with the language barrier was to avoid the conference altogether.

Official meetings and school events clearly were times when language concerns would have been most evident. Unlike Delia's comments that the meetings were primarily in English, I found that more often than not, meetings tended to skew more towards Spanish than English. However, I would have to agree with her that the translations were not always accurate or complete. The result was a meeting that was only completely understandable to individuals who were bilingual. It should also be noted that while the flyers and messages were always sent out in both English and Spanish, nowhere on the flyer did it actually say that the meetings were translated into Spanish. The responses by a number of detached mothers indicate that they were unaware that meetings were conducted in both languages.

Yet as was noted in previous chapters, language was not the only problem with Orange Elementary's meetings. Parents' strategies of actions were also shaped by the way meetings and events were run. Meetings were rigidly organized around district agendas whose goal, by legal necessity, was compliance rather than effectual communication and interaction with parents. This rigid structure coupled with a lack of presentation strategies caused some parents to complain that meetings were "siempre lo mismo" (always the same). In spite of this claim of sameness, parents did not seem to be clear on the purpose of the meetings or what had been presented.

One reason for the ambiguity may have been due to the fact that Orange Elementary often used educational jargon at both school wide and classroom meetings. Therefore, even when translations were accurate, they did not produce effective communication because parents did not understand the words in either language. The best example of this was the difficult time parents experienced trying to understand and explain the Uniform Complaint Procedures (UCP). Parents and staff alike confused the UCP with the more logical and less complicated informal process for resolving problems that had been effectively communicated. Most parents knew that it was best to go to the teacher first, then the principal, and finally the district office. They were told in a variety of meetings that to bypass one of these steps meant that they would be sent back to the beginning to try again. The UCP's focus on civil rights violations was far too complicated and ambiguous for most parents and even school personnel to be able to grasp much less articulate.

One organizational procedure that significantly impacted the principal and teachers at all meetings was the importance of maintaining accurate sign-in sheets. The school's seemingly endless emphasis on this point had a clear influence on parent behavior. Even when they did not know why they were signing-in, most did so religiously, especially mothers. Many mothers felt that their child would receive special treatment or even extra credit if they sign-in. For those involved with the One-to-One Laptop program, they similarly learned that without a signature from the principal or school official confirming their participation, they would not receive the credit they needed to keep their laptop computers.

Not all behavioral expectations by the school, however, were as clear and concise as the sign-in sheets. When neither the school nor the parents were quite sure about an organizational procedure, chaos was the result. This confusion was most evident in the undetermined realm of children's behavior when both parents and educators were present. There appeared to be a dilemma as to who was responsible for regulating the behavior of both pre-school and school-aged children. It often seemed as though both sides deferred to the other and the children took advantage of this by causing a commotion. The result was an inability for meeting participants to hear or stay focused on the issues being discussed. It appears that when institutions fail to shape behavior, behaviors, even if unwanted, nonetheless take place.

Summary

In this chapter, I analyzed several external constraints on culture at Orange Elementary. I began by showing how actions could be influenced by widely disseminated semiotic codes when they became part of the cultural resources available to parents. I intimated that an individual's decision to choose a course of action may be based upon how certain actions will be perceived by others rather than a deeply held belief. Culture shapes action both through deeply held inner beliefs as well as powerful messages from society that can shape the meaning of actions. While I concur with Swidler (2001) that "well-publicized cultural codes" have the potential for changing strategies of action by redefining its meaning (p.7), I demonstrated that this rarely occurred at Orange Elementary except indirectly through modeling. The principal, who was the individual best situated to publicize new cultural codes and redirect action, only used school events and public meetings to repeat previously disseminated school procedures or to make announcements concerning upcoming events. Neither the principal nor the teachers took advantage of the opportunities to widely publicize semiotic codes that could have changed parent behaviors and improved the home-school connections. The institutional leaders never presented a vision for the school and a message about the importance of education or instructions on how parents could help their children become more successful academically.

Contextually, I showed that the homogeneity of the school population and the community worked as a buffer to protect them from some of the contextual crises they might otherwise have faced. The school community seemed unaffected, perhaps in part due to a lack of information, by sliding test scores, or a host of other challenges such as SED, ELL status, and achievement gaps. The relatively static environment they experienced may have kept them from contending with the important academic issues that were present at the school.

In the final section, I addressed why certain cultural norms were followed almost universally, like daily start times and ingress and egress procedures, and why other norms, such as volunteering at school and attending school meetings, were only followed by a handful of parents. I showed that both physical structures like fences and room sizes as well as organization practices in the form of policies and procedures had an impact on the behaviors and practices of parents. I illustrated that when institutions fail to shape behavior, behaviors, even if unwanted, nonetheless take place.

If Swidler’s proposition that codes, contexts, and institutions can mediate culture’s affects on behavior is correct, could (should) this knowledge be used to create and disseminate parent involvement policies that redefine acceptable actions by adults and change both school and parent behaviors in order to reduce achievement gaps?

CHAPTER 8

Categorizing Patterns of Parent Involvement

In the previous chapter, I analyzed how the external constraints on culture in the form of codes, contexts, and the institution influence the strategies of action chosen by parents at Orange Elementary. In this chapter, I will categorize the patterns of parent involvement practices or strategies of action and the cultured capacities that were observed and talked about by Mexican immigrant parents and school personnel. I will begin with Epstein's (1995, 2001) Six Types of Involvement for Parents, adding a seventh category, which I will call "Socializing," to account for data that did not seem to fit well in the other six categories. Special attention will be given to the similarities and differences between connected and detached mothers.

As was shown in chapter two, stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers) and researchers often do not share a common definition of parent involvement (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; McCarthey, 2000; Mattingly et al., 2002). This failure to label the specific parent involvement behaviors on the part of many researchers has contributed to the confusion and, occasionally, strong emotion that is often associated with this topic (Valdés, 1996). While policies directed toward schools, like NCLB, were conceived of by individuals who were not just interested in any kind of parent involvement, but the specific types of involvement that have been empirically linked with improved academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2003), by ignoring or dismissing parent practices that do not have a direct link to increased achievement, researchers and policymakers may actually be overlooking strategies of action that might serves as catalysts for other desired forms of involvement.

I have chosen to use Epstein's (1995, 2001) categories for describing parent involvement because they are perhaps the most widespread and most closely aligned to the requirements set forth in NCLB, and include both the formal involvement at institutions as well as informal types of involvement at home. It will become clear that, while all six are meant to be incorporated together based on the needs of the local school and its community, some types were utilized much more frequently than others. Additionally, while almost all behaviors and beliefs were easily situated in at least one category, many fit into more than one. However, I found it necessary to introduce a seventh category, Socializing, in order to account for a large amount of data that could not be fully accounted for in Epstein's other six types due to their unique characteristics.

Parenting

Epstein's (1995) first type of involvement is parenting. It encompasses both the basic elements of existence such as food, clothes, shelter, safety, and proper hygiene as well as the more subtle forms of life in the form of family beliefs and values, including an awareness of the importance of school and education. I have classified parenting as informal since it is primarily a function of the home and does not come under the authority of the school. However, for many educational institutions, parenting issues are addressed as part of the comprehensive package of services schools make available to parents by providing them with information as well as an arena for meeting with and learning from other parents and experts in the field. Schools support parents as they fulfill their ongoing responsibilities for raising their children.

To begin with, Orange Elementary did not provide any organized support to parents in the area of parenting. As we saw in previous chapters, Mrs. Noche, the principal, did not provide a clear message to parents about the importance of school or the role of parents. Educational events for parents were strictly limited to school topics such as language arts and mathematics. Issues relating to parenting were taken for granted or simply ignored. Even when parents did raise concerns about issues relating to parenting, as occurred at the first ELAC meeting when several parents asked about the dangers of the internet, Mrs. Gabela, the research teacher, quickly moved on to the next agenda item rather than pursuing a topic of interest and concern to parents. Support in the area of parenting was limited to impromptu bits of advice from Mrs. Noche. For example, at the second ELAC meeting, while discussing the importance of good attendance, the principal told us that her mother made her attend school even when she was sick, leaving it to the school nurse to determine if her illness was severe enough to require her to return home.

In much the same way that discussions on parenting were unplanned and unprepared by school personnel, parents themselves seemed caught off guard and unprepared to answer questions regarding the characteristics of a good parent, in general, or a good parent from Mexico, in particular. For example, Esmeralda Campos (D) responded in the following halting and disjointed fashion when asked the question,

“Comprensión…. No tanto tener … también que darles todo lo que quieren, pero, o sea, me entiende, como …ammm, como le diré … lo necesario… Darles tiempo…. (Pausa 4 segundos) Yo creo nomás. (Murmulló.)”	“Understanding.… Not so much having … also that you give them what they want, but, I mean, do you understand me, like … ammm, how would I say it … what’s necessary … give them time…. (4 second pause) I think that’s it. (She mumbles something else.)” (I: Campos, 12/13/08)

Esmeralda, however, was not the only one who had difficulties answering this question. In fact, Laura Rodriguez (D) replied, “Está muy difícil (se ríe), y no la voy a poder contestar” (That’s really hard [she laughs], and I’m not going to be able to answer it). After mentioning the difficult economy in both countries, she eventually did say, “Estar uno más con los hijos. Y tratar uno de ser mejor padre también.” (To spend more time with one’s children. And to try and be a better parent, too.) As a working mother, Laura’s laugh may have betrayed her desire to spend more time with her children than she was able to do under the circumstances. Her reference to the bad economic times seemed to be, at least partially, an attempt to justify for her inability to do so. For Laura, a good parent was someone like her who was *trying* to be a better parent. As was demonstrated with her failed attempt to attend the Family Math Night in chapter five, she may have failed but she was trying.

Disengaged mothers were not the only ones who had difficulty answering this question. Esther Muniz (C) told us, “Nadie nos enseñó a ser buen padre” (No one taught us [how] to be a good parent). The normally articulate and fast responding Elena Rodas (C) also seemed to be at a loss for words. After several false starts and attempts to articulate her position, she finally settled on the idea that good Mexican parents “pagan la escuela al niño y allí están con él" (pay the school of the child and they are there with him).

Connected and detached mothers alike used platitudes and general phrases. For example, a common response was, "apoyarlos en todo" (support them in everything) or "ser responsables" (be responsible). Most of the mothers attempted to answer the question, at least partially, in relationship to education. A common response of the connected mothers, reflecting the school's emphasis on attendance, was "traer temprano a los niños a la escuela" (to bring children to school early). Connected mothers also mentioned more frequently that detached mothers the importance of making sure that homework and school projects were completed.

Miriam Lopez (D), a detached mothers who was one of the most involved in her children's education at home without being closely connected to the school, had a lot to say about what a good parent ought to do. In addition to bringing the child to school and making sure that the homework was completed, she felt that it was important for the parent to support the school's discipline policies by teaching proper behavior and then following up on it with classroom visits. She said that parents should tell their children, "Sabes que, cuando la maestra está hablando, tú tienes que estar callado y escuchando." (Do you know what, when the teacher is talking, you need to be quiet and listen.) A strong message about student behavior, however, was not enough for Miriam. She told her son that she would be checking up on him.

> “‘Pórtese bien,’ le digo, ‘porque yo voy a hablar con la maestra en la tarde cuando venga por ti.’ Y él pensó como que, a lo mejor, la primera vez pensó que iba a ser como su papa, nomás le iba a decir pero no lo iba hacer. Entonces yo ya me baje y me dijo: “¿A dónde vas mami?’ Y yo le dije, ‘Voy a hablar con la maestra a ver cómo te portas.” Y dice, ‘Me porte mal.’”

> “‘Behave yourself,’ I tell him, ‘because I am going to talk to your teacher in the afternoon when I come for you.’ And he thought that, maybe, the first time he thought that I was going to be like his dad, I was only going to say it but I wasn’t going to do it. Then when I already got out [of the car] and he said to me, ‘Where are you going, mommy?” And I tell him, ‘I’m going to talk to your teacher to see how you behaved.’ And he says, ‘I misbehaved.’” (I: Lopez, 12/13/08)

Miriam never attended any of the school meetings and never did any volunteer work at the school, but her parenting style certainly concurred with the position promoted by many educators. Additionally, her son learned that his mother, unlike his dad, would do what she said she was going to do.

A major part of parenting for the immigrant mothers in my study involved the giving of “consejos” or advice, especially in regards to schooling. These mothers not only told their children how they should act at school, but also how to be responsible and to work hard. They taught their children the importance of doing homework even when they did not feel like doing it. They told them that they should respect others, especially their teachers. They even counseled them on the importance of being clean and the importance of dressing appropriately for a given occasion,

Many of the mothers explained how they taught their children about the benefits of receiving a good education as well as the consequences for failing to do so. The primary benefit of a good education was financial remuneration. Whether it was “tenis de más de $100” ($100 dollar tennis shoes), “ropa de marca” (name brand clothes), or a special kind of “carro” (car), these mothers believed and worked to transmit to their children the connection between a good education and success in the work place.

These mothers were also clear about the negative consequences for not completing school successfully. María Cruz (D), one of the least involved mothers at home and school in the study, told her children, “Mira, tu papá trabaja de jardinero y gana $300 a la semana” (Look, your dad works as a gardener and earns only $300 a week). Recognizing that she would not be able to leave money to her childen, she also told them, “La única herencia que les voy a dejar es la escuela.” (The only inheritance that I’m going to leave you is your schooling). Of all the mothers I interviewed, María seemed to be the most interested in the $20 I gave out for the interview. Her interest in the money, however, did not seem to deter her from responding openly to my questions. She even told us that her children had threatened to call the “Migra” (immigration agents) if she did not do what they wanted her to do. María faced economic as well as family problems on an ongoing basis.

Many mothers recounted examples of friends and family who failed to get a good education and were working in the fields harvesting crops even though “nacieron aquí” (they were born here). Delia Franco (C) told us that she takes her children to Mexico so they can experience the harsh realities of life across the border. Doris Silva (C) told us that her husband brought their son to his work “para que viera como es” (so that he could see how it is). “Consejos,” whether verbal or experiential, were given to their children so that they would “échele ganas” (try your hardest).

Communicating

Epstein's (1995, 2001) second type of involvement is communicating. I classify this as a formal type of involvement since it refers to the lines of communication that exist between the school and the home. Communicating stresses the importance of and need for positive interactions between parents and school personnel, especially teachers. Clear lines of communication allow parents to better understand school programs and policies so that they can effectively monitor their child's progress. When communicating is carried out effectively, it also allows the adults in a child's life to respond more effectively when there are problems.

Unlike parenting, there was much more variation between connected and detached mothers when it came to their views and experiences communicating at Orange Elementary. While all mothers and school personnel mentioned flyers or notes from the school as a way to receive information about the school and upcoming events, the connected mothers and school personnel were more likely to also mention the school's marquee and the automated phone messaging system. While none of the involved mothers felt that it was difficult to understand the messages they received from the school, several detached mothers said that the translation found in flyers was often difficult to understand and that some materials sent home were only in English.

The same difference of opinion applied to verbal communication with teachers. While the connected mothers recognized that it was a little more challenging to communicate with a teacher who did not speak Spanish, none of them saw this as a problem since there were so many bilingual staff at the school. The views of the connected mothers mirrored those of the school staff. Even when an interpreter was not readily available, Elena Rodas (C) voiced a common sentiment of other connected mothers when she said, “Algunas veces, con mi inglés tan malo…. trato de esforzarme un poco…. Si no hay quien traduzca.” (Sometimes, with my terrible English … I try to force myself a little.… If there’s no one to translate.)

The self-efficacy that connected mothers felt with regards to communicating with school personnel was evident in the proactive stance they took when interacting with their children’s teachers. Connected mothers took the initiative to introduce themselves to their children’s teachers either the first day of school or, at the very latest, during Back-to-School Night. Connected mothers did not wait for the school to reach out to them. Norma Robles (C) said that she would tell her children’s teachers, “Cualquier cosa digame” (tell me about whatever). Doris Silva (C) repeated the same to her children’s teachers, “Cualquier cosa … sea bueno o malo” (whatever … be it good or bad). Dora Sanchez (C) raised the level even higher by stating that she met with her children’s teachers, “todos los días si se puede” (every day if possible).

This proactive stance on the part of the connected mothers is in sharp contrast to the reactive behaviors of the detached mothers. The reader may recall how Esmeralda Campos (D) was signing her daughter’s homework packet without checking to see if it was being done correctly. It took a call from the teacher to get her to change her behavior. Diana Salcedo (D) said that she avoided interacting with teachers primarily because of the language barrier, but she also disliked the way teachers were always checking on her with regards to her children’s homework and attendance. As we saw above, Miriam Lopez (D) was unique among the detached mothers in her proactive behavior when it came to verifying the behavior of her son by visiting the teacher. That being said, even the most detached mothers usually attended the twice yearly parent-teacher conferences as instituted by the school and organized by the teacher.

The self-efficacy of connected mothers was augmented by their connection with other connected mothers. All of the connected mothers said that they also depended on one another to learn about school events or to remind each other to attend. Additionally, if a connected mother missed an activity, she would use other connected mothers as informants to find out what had happened. Luz Feliciano (D), the mother who used to be involved but stopped completely after a dispute with the high school principals over the participation of her son in the graduation ceremony, was the only detached mother to tell us that she also heard about what was taking place at the school from the connected mothers who did attend school meetings and events.

Despite that, the effectiveness of the school's communication was superficial at best, even with the connected mothers. Connected mothers may have known the dates for meetings and school events, but none of the mothers, connected or detached, were able to explain the Uniform Complaint Procedures (UCP), NCLB, or the significance of the school's Academic Performance Index (API) number. Even the members of the SSC were uncertain about the school budget and how decisions were made at the school. As we learned in chapter five, this confusion was in large part due to the ineffectiveness of the presenters as well as the distractions caused by unruly children and talkative audience members. There were even times when the principal and the resource teacher seemed uncertain of the answers to parent questions.

Even if one were to grant that language was not a hindrance to communication as the connected mothers maintained, there were other barriers. For example, the doors to the cafeteria were only opened 10 minutes before the start of educational events. This late opening meant there was little time for informal talk between the staff and the parents. The connection between the two groups seemed limited to space and time, not interpersonal relationships. I noted the same in chapter five at the SSC meetings. Teachers and parents shared a common table and agenda, but there was almost no interpersonal communication between them. I also showed how the dismissal area fence worked against the nurturing of communication between parents and teachers by separating them at dismissal times.

Finally, a translator does not ensure an accurate transmission of the message. For example, during the second grade Family Literacy Night presentation, Mrs. Perez did not translate everything that Mrs. Estrada said accurately. Sometimes she added things. For example, Mrs. Estrada said, “We need to read to our children in order to model good reading,” and Mrs. Perez added, only in Spanish, “No lee como un robot” (Don’t read like a robot). Other times, Mrs. Perez would leave things out. For example, Mrs. Perez did not translate Mrs. Estrada’s explanation of the school wide reading program that challenged students to read 25 books a month in order to watch a movie. This example demonstrates the challenges faced by those who must depend on others to mediate their communication. It is not wise to assume that a translator has done so accurately.

Volunteering at School

Like communicating, Epstein’s (1995, 2001) third type of involvement, volunteering at school, is classified as formal because it takes primarily at school and is under the control of school personnel. In fact, volunteering at school is often the stereotypical behavior that comes to mind when one generally thinks about parent involvement. Parents engaging in this type of behavior are often seen at the school in the office or a classroom, helping teachers and administrators with a specific task that either directly or indirectly benefits children at the school. Epstein adds to this description by incorporating notions of cultured capacities that may or may not be used to construct strategies of action. These include understanding the teacher’s job, feeling comfortable at school, recognizing that families are welcome and valued at school, believing in one’s ability to work in school and with children, choosing to take steps to improve one’s own education, and deciding to conduct school activities at home. By definition, mothers who engaged in volunteering at school were classified as connected as no detached mothers took part in these activities.

As we learned in chapters four and five, the primary mechanism for engaging in volunteer work at Orange Elementary was the Thursday Volunteers gatherings in the resource room. Most Thursdays, mothers were invited to join the resource teacher in preparing materials for classroom teachers. The mothers who participated in the gatherings were not volunteering only to help their own children, but whichever teacher needed the extra help. A parent did not need any special skills to participate. There were always connected mothers willing to show new volunteers what they needed to do as was the case when I attended. Volunteers universally told me that they were involved to make Orange Elementary a better place for children. Their actions and beliefs correlate closely to Epstein’s (2001) expanded definition of volunteering at school.

The only other way for parents to volunteer at school was as an independent agent. This is probably best exemplified in the tireless efforts of Elena Rodas (C). While Elena did volunteer in official ways as an ELAC officer or DELAC representative, she primarily found areas of need at the school and simply began to work to fill those needs. Whether directing cars to move out of the unloading zone for buses in the front of the school or keeping upper grade students out of the upper grade hallways, Elena was always visible at the site, and in spite of her limited knowledge of English, she was not afraid to speak when necessary.

Less visible, but similarly active was Celia Ruiz (C). She chose to spend her time volunteering in the classroom of her children’s teachers. Volunteering in the classroom was limited, but occasionally a mother would be allowed to sit in a kinder or first grade classroom and prepare materials for the teacher. None of the immigrant mothers I spoke with every worked one-on-one with students on academic skills. While many felt some degree of confident helping their own children, the immigrant mothers I studied did not feel that their English was good enough to assist other children with school work. Their strategy of action for supporting teachers during the school day was limited to tasks that did not include the need to speak in English.

Orange Elementary did not have a formal group of mothers such as a PTA or booster club for fundraising the year I was there. SSC member, Doris Silva (C), told me that there used to be a booster club, but it ended because parent volunteers were concerned about how the money they raised was spent and they were frustrated because only a few parents participated in the fundraising activities. At the first ELAC (10/16/08), one mother asked, “¿Por qué no hacemos fundraisers?” (Why don’t we do fundraisers). “¿Por qué no hacemos cosas de $1 en vez de $6 … un chocolate o cualquier cosa?” (Why don’t we do things for $1 instead of $6 … a chocolate or whatever). While ELAC was not the correct venue for discussing fundraising, it did express a desire of parents to get involved as well as a way for Orange Elementary to open up its volunteer opportunities to more parents. Mrs. Gabela, the school leader in charge of the meeting that day, did not even give a response.

Learning at Home

Learning at home, Epstein’s (1995, 2001) fourth type of involvement, is also classified as informal in that it primarily takes place away from the school and is under the direct control of parents. The purpose of learning at home is to make homes more school-like (Epstein, 2001). Without question, the most common conception of learning at home is homework. This nightly task is a mission for some parents and a bane for others. Learning at home, however, is not limited to homework. This type of involvement begins with an awareness of children as learners, and includes knowing how to support and encourage learning at home each year. Families are encouraged to engage in discussions of school, class work, and homework based on an understanding of the instructional program being offered their children at school.

For this section, I had to depend almost entirely on the self-reporting of parents as to the kinds of activities they did at home with their children. While it is impossible to say just how much answers were influenced by the fact that these mothers were taking part in an educational study, clearly some, and possibly all, of the mothers highlighted areas that they thought an educator would want to hear. Perhaps the only way to begin to differentiate occasional practice from routine, or obligation from opportunity is to analyze the details in their descriptions. There were both apparent similarities as well as significant differences in the descriptions of the kinds of behaviors engaged in by connected and detached mothers.

As was shown in chapter six, all mothers acknowledged the importance of education and schooling. Yet when asked about the kinds of activities they engaged in with their children, connected mothers overwhelmingly not only talked about helping their children with homework, they described in detail the homework routine, including ways of motivating their children and engaging them in other learning activities. All but one of the detached mothers also mentioned homework, but the majority embedded it within a list of other activities that included going to the park, watching TV, eating at Chuck. E. Cheese, or spending time together as a family.

Dora Sanchez (C) exemplifies the kind of descriptive detail provided by connected mothers. As we saw in chapter six, Dora was highly skilled at obtaining additional learning materials from her children’s teachers to use at home. What she received, she used at home with her children. She explained how each of her children wanted her undivided attention so she had to modify her behavior by first working with one and then the other. “Revisamos una tarea y leemos, y luego hacen os otra cosa y luego otra cosa.” (We review the homework and read, and then we do something else, and then later something else.) She incorporated many educational games so that her children could have fun while learning at the same time. She told us that her friends and neighbors had a hard time believing her when she told them that she did not have a problem getting her children to do their homework. She explained that she simple says, “Andale, que tu tarea, que mira que vamos a estudiar” (Let’s get going, to your homework, let’s see what are we going to study), and they get their books and go to work. Later, she checks to make sure it is correct. On the other hand, she did not deny that her oldest son enjoyed playing soccer with her husband. Using great detail, Dora was able to describe a typical evening that included homework, educational games, and even sports in the park.

Doris Silva (C) also provided details regarding her family’s nightly routine. She described how the sixth grader, her youngest, did not like drawing or doing crafts in the least, but he enjoyed writing. “Con los grandes, me pongo a leer. ‘Estoy aburrido.’ Quierren usar la computadora. Deben leerme un capítulo.” (With the older ones, I read with them. ‘I’m bored.’ They want to use the computer. They have to read one chapter for me.) She does not describe an idealized world with perfect children, but rather the realities of raising a family with adolescents and teenagers. She added that around 7:00 each night, the entire family, including their two dogs, would go for an hour walk. In addition to spending time as a family, she explained that it was a way for her husband to help control his high blood pressure. Her detailed description, like that of Dora, added increased credibility to the telling.

By happenstance, I was able to glean additional insight into the nightly activities during an afternoon observation on 2/18/09. I was able to compare and contrast the conversations I heard between several of the connected mothers I had interviewed and a mother who I never saw at any of the official meetings or educational events. While standing nearby Celia Lemus (C) and Norma Robles (C), I overheard another mother who was not with them who had a cell phone to her ear and three small children at her side speaking angrily in Spanish with her daughter who had just come out of school. She was upset with the girl for forgetting to get or submit some paperwork. When my attention returned to the conversation of the connected mothers, I discovered that they were discussing homework difficulties the night before. Celia was commenting on how her son had failed to do his homework after school even though she had told him to get it all done. At 9:00 PM, when he was supposed to be in bed, he still was not done. By the tone of the conversation and the dismay with which it was told, it was clear that this was not the typical routine for this home. Furthermore, Celia made it clear that she did not expect it to happen again. It is doubtful that their conversation was meant to impress me since I was not actually a part of it. More than likely, this was an authentic conversation between two mothers with similar interests, namely the academic success of their children.

Connected mothers, along with their children and occasionally their spouses, were also frequent participants at the educational events held at the school. The stated goal of these events was to give parents skills and strategies that they could use at home with their children. The bilingual flyers that had been sent home stated, “Teachers will present reading (math) activities that will help you teach your child at home.” The intensity with which the parents at these events took part in the activities hardly seemed feigned. Even when the teachers doing the presentation appeared less than engaged with the materials they were presenting, the parents all seemed eager to learn.

The same cannot be said of the detached mothers. While homework and reading books were mentioned, they never provided any detail or explanation of how it was done or the challenges they faced. María Cruz (D) was the only one who did not mention anything academic in her weekly routine. Esmeralda Campos (D) also claimed that homework was part of her activity regiment with her children. However, the reader might recall that she also admitted to signing her daughter’s homework packet without even reviewing it until after she received a call from her daughter’s teacher. It is undeniable that homework does occupy a place in the activity list of each of these families. However, it is also clear from the interviews and observations that the connected mothers, overall, engaged in learning at home with more passion and determination to see their children succeed than did the majority of the detached mothers.

Decision-Making

Epstein’s (1995, 2001) fifth type of involvement is decision-making. This is perhaps the most formal of all practices because it is not only governed by the local school, but it is also monitored by the district and the state. The successful inclusion of parents in decision-making often rests with the behaviors of those within the institution. Parents become empowered to act only after feeling ownership at the school and possessing an awareness of parents' voices in school decisions. At its best, parents have authentic input into policies that affect their children's education. Parents engaged in decision-making should have an awareness of school, district, state, and federal policies. Jointly developed policies are often seen as a beneficial step on the road to increased parent involvement (NCLB, 2002; Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 2001).

None of the parents or teachers I talked to during my time at Orange Elementary every mentioned decision-making as an aspect of parent involvement. This is particularly surprising as I interviewed several members of the SSC as well as elected leaders of the ELAC. In addition, no one ever mentioned the school's parent involvement policy or committee bylaws, not even at the meetings where they were supposed to be discussed and voted upon annually. The school did have a policy and it had elected members of official committees, yet even the most connected mothers failed to see their part in the decision-making process at the school.

As was discussed in both chapters five and seven, this lack of ownership by the parents was in large part due to the way that official meetings were conducted at the site. In addition to the utter lack of presentation strategies and a focus on compliance rather than understanding, the meetings were largely irrelevant to participants. Parents did not seem to be interested in learning about the UCP (Uniform Complaint Procedures) any more than they wanted to follow Robert's Rules of Order for conducting official meetings. When a topic of interest did occasionally surface, it always seemed to be quickly dismissed in an effort to get to the next agenda item.

Furthermore, both parents and school leadership seemed to have adopted a pattern of behavior that allowed for a disconnect between the meeting being conducted and the type of business they hoped would take place at it. The kinds of advice and comments that were made by parents, primarily informational or off-topic, were at least partially in response to what they had observed from the school personnel. Mrs. Noche and Mrs. Gabela primarily provided information to parents at official meetings. The information was not presented in such a way that parents had to decide anything or do anything except listen. Mrs. Noche often strayed from the agendas and added extraneous information that she deemed important. The parents responded in kind. In other words, when parents were given a chance to speak at ELAC meetings, their “advice” was not about issues relating to English learners, but about other school issues or personal questions. In fact, many of the comments made at the ELAC should have been made at the SSC. Yet, the SSC was never promoted at Orange Elementary and I was the only non-voting member to attend while I was involved with the school.

Indeed, instead of being participants in decision-making, it seemed as though some parents were willing to sit through an entire meeting, often lasting over an hour, just to ask a question that had nothing to do with the meeting or issues being discussed. Parents were not opposed to receiving information at official meetings, but the information they wanted did not seem to coincide with the agenda. Furthermore, the school and district policies supporting shared decision-making between school personnel and parents did not seem to have any influence on the meetings in the least.

Collaborating with the Community

Epstein's (1995, 2001) sixth type of involvement is collaborating with the community. If enacted as envisioned by Epstein, collaborating with the community would be a formal type of involvement that would require the school to take an active role in connecting families from the school with local resources in the community. As with each of the other types of involvement, this would require stakeholders who were associated with the school to have a cultured capacity allowing for the possibility of the school taking a role in the community and of the community's contribution to the school. It would also require schools to be knowledgeable of local resources for families to increase skills and talents or to obtain needed services.

Like decision-making above, Orange Elementary's collaboration with the community was scarce. With the exception of several after school programs for needy children, Orange Elementary did not coordinate consistently with any local agencies outside of the school district. The school's link with community resources was never mentioned by any parents or school personnel. Elena Rodas (C) was the only individual I spoke with to ever mention any community resource. In addition to her extensive volunteer work at the school, Elena was also engaged in securing large amounts of food each week from the senior center for her elderly neighbors. She told me that the food was all donated from local grocery stores. More likely than not, other parents knew and used community services, but they were not being coordinated or promoted by the school and no other parents mentioned them.

Socializing

Overall, Epstein's (1995, 2001) Six Types of Involvement for Parents was able to account for the vast majority of data I collected regarding the strategies of action and cultured capacities of the immigrant Mexican parents at Orange Elementary. There was, however, a significant amount of data that both connected and disengaged mothers talked about which was clearly part of their cultured capacities they brought with them from Mexico but could not be accounted for in Epstein's Six Types. I have chosen to identify this seventh type as "socializing" due to the emphasis placed on social interactions and entertainment.

Something interesting surfaced when I asked the mothers in my study to describe their schools in Mexico and the ways that their parents were able to get involved. Almost universally, these mothers recounted positive memories of festivals and banquets that brought the entire community together. To my surprise, unlike other topics where connected mothers were usually more articulate and thoughtful about their responses than detached mothers, here I found just the opposite. Detached mothers actually had more to say, and with greater detail, than connected mothers.

Mercedes Juarez (D), a working mother with one son in first grade, exemplifies both the great detail and enthusiasm expressed by the immigrant Mexican mothers in my study. Like a number of mothers, she talked about the "bailables" (dances), rifas, (raffles), and how they "festejaban" (celebrated) holidays such as "el cinco de mayo" (May fifth), "el 16 de septiembre" (September 16 [Independence Day]), and "la posada de navidad" (a type of Christmas parade). She explained how each school had "juntas" (parent groups) that worked “para recoger la cooperación” (to collect the cooperation [i.e., money]) from the parents at the school. She lamented that “pues, esta escuela, hace tiempo, no festejaban nada” (well, this school, for a long time, hasn’t celebrated anything). When I asked if she thought that these types of activities were good for a school, she replied,

> “Sí, porque así los padres tienen más eventos, y por lo menos vienen, y ya no solo vienen a dejar y a traer a los hijos. Y los papás se van involucrando más en la escuela.”

> “Yes, because this way parents have more events, and at least they come, and not just to come to drop off or pickup their children. And parents start to become more involved in school.” (I: Juarez, 1/31/09)

Mercedes viewed social events as a way of involving more parents at school.

Like Mercedes, Dora Sanchez (C) also talked enthusiastically about social events at the school, noting that these events were “diferente a la cultura de aquí” (different from the culture here). She fondly described her memories of these special events. “Yo recuerdo que yo veía a mi mamá. Yo le quería presumir.” (I remember that I would see my mother. I want to show off for her.) Twice while telling us about the school’s various social events, Dora told us, “Y por eso yo siempre estoy aquí con mis hijos.” (And that’s why I’m always here with my children.) Mercedes hypothesized that social events would get more parents involved at school, and Dora, one of the school’s most connected mothers, attributed her current involvement at the site to her fond memories of social events at her own school when she was growing up.

These descriptions seem to shed light on the reason for both the massive turnout and the strategies of action I observed at social events in chapter five. The winter program, in particular, seems to fall into a category of social events that was readily recognizable to immigrant Mexican parents who shared common cultured capacities. Parents were able to easily access positive memories from their own childhood and comfortable integrate the behaviors they had learned in Mexico into a U.S. educational setting.

However, not every mother talked about social events at her school in Mexico. Catalina Ortiz (D) did not mention any social events, but she did recall that the teachers "castigaban muy feo" (punished harshly). Diana Salcedo (D) talked about the "juntas" (parent groups), but she also recalled the words of her father who never went to the school, "Sólo para sacar dinero son buenos." (They are only good for getting money out of you.)

Some may contend that the activities described above are not relevant to the school's goal of academic achievement and therefore are not worthy of recognition or attention by school personnel. Others may assert that these social activities are actually a subset of either Epstein's (1995) type three, volunteering at school, or type five, decision-making, framework. I would argue that while there are certainly elements of socializing embedded within Epstein's framework, none of the current categories adequately account for the data I have presented.

Next, while there may not be a direct link to academic achievement, by allowing, and even encouraging, parents to get involved in ways that capitalize upon the cultured capacities which they already possess, we may be able to build a bridge that allows for greater participation in those areas that many schools do want from parents. This seventh type may actually be a catalyst for involvement in the other six types and a stronger connection with the school. In the same way that Epstein’s types are engineered to make homes more *school-like*, by making some U.S. schools more *Mexican-like*, we may actually be able to increase parent involvement as well as goodwill from the immigrant Mexican families we service.

Summary

Epstein’s (1995, 2001) Six types of Involvement for Parents was used to categorize the strategies of action and cultured capacities that I observed and heard about in interviews and conversations with parents and staff at Orange Elementary. I found that the school did not provide any organized support to parents in the area of parenting (Type 1). In much the same way that discussions on parenting were unplanned and unprepared by school personnel, connected and detached mothers alike seemed unprepared to answer questions regarding the characteristics of a good parent. Unlike many of the detached mothers, connected mothers and school staff both felt that language was not a barrier to communication (Type 2). Additionally, connected parents utilized a network of other connected mothers to learn about school meetings and events. Orange Elementary provided only limited opportunities for parents to volunteer at school (Type 3). Mothers demonstrated their commitment to making the school a better place for all students by helping any teacher at the school, regardless of their own child’s age and classroom. The researcher had to depend almost entirely on parent self-reporting to discover the kinds of learning activities parents did at home with their children (Type 4). Connected mothers overwhelmingly talked about helping their children with homework and described in detail the homework routine. Notions of decision-making (Type 5) and collaborating with the community (Type 6) were almost non-existent at Orange Elementary. Official meetings were conducted in an effort to be compliant with district, state, and federal policies, but even SSC members did not see themselves as participants in the decision-making process at the school. Orange Elementary did not coordinate any community services for parents and families on a large scale.

While overall, Epstein's (1995, 2001) Six Types of Involvement for Parents was able to account for the vast majority of data I collected regarding the strategies of action and cultured capacities of the immigrant Mexican parents at Orange Elementary, there was also a significant amount of data that could not be accounted for using these six types. I chose to identify a seventh type of involvement that I label as "socializing" due to the emphasis placed on social interactions and entertainment. Unlike other topics where connected mothers were usually more articulate and thoughtful about their responses, here I found that detached mothers actually had more to say. I posited that this seventh type may work as a catalyst for involvement in the other six types, and it might be a means for strengthening connections with the school. In the same way that Epstein's types are engineered to make homes more *school-like*, by making some U.S. schools more *Mexican-like*, we may actually be able to increase parent involvement as well as goodwill from the immigrant Mexican families we service. As noted previously, the implications of Epstein's classifications are that "increasing parent involvement requires changing the behavior of both parents and school personnel" (Mattingly, et al., 2002, p.551). Are schools ready to make a change?

CHAPTER 9

Conclusions and Recommendations

This interpretive research project on Mexican immigrant mothers was born out of my reading of the literature on parent involvement, Latinos, and achievement gaps combined with my daily experiences as a non-Latino teacher, and later principal, in an elementary school that serves a population that is overwhelmingly Latino, socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED), and comprised of English language learners (ELL). My interest was both theoretical as well as practical. While almost all parents, educators, politicians and the public-at-large seem to agree that parent involvement in a child's formal education is beneficial, in general, as well as a valuable tool in efforts to eliminate achievement gaps, I found the variations noted in levels of parent involvement in education among U.S. Latinos to be alarming since these differences threaten to diminish the potential benefits of parent involvement in reducing the extreme gaps previously noted in achievement between Latinos and whites and/or Asians. The literature is replete with studies comparing levels of parent involvement between different class and ethnoracial groups, but it is does not address why parents with similar socioeconomic, ethnoracial, and cultural backgrounds respond to schools in such distinct ways. Furthermore, previous studies have primarily focused on parents who are involved at a school site, either ignoring or unable to obtain the perspective of those who have been described as uninvolved or hard to reach. A better understanding of within group differences may provide some of the answers to both the causes of and solutions to the achievement gaps described in the literature.

This ethnographic case study was designed to address both the variations in parent involvement within a comparatively homogenous Mexican immigrant population as well as the similarities and differences between those classified as involved, which I came to describe as connected, and those classified as uninvolved, which I came to describe as detached. I was particularly interested in learning why individuals from similar cultural backgrounds chose to participate in such diverse ways in U.S. public schools. Consequently, I focused on how a select group of Mexican immigrant mothers used their cultured capacities to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States. It is my hope that by gaining insight into how culture influences the participation of some Mexican immigrant mothers in the formal education of their children in the United States that those wishing to improve connections between schools and other Mexican immigrant parents might find greater success, and, as a result, reduce the current gaps in achievement.

A Thin Line of Action

Swidler's (1986, 2001) model allowed me to distinguish between the behaviors or strategies of action that I observed and the cultured capacities or tools that parents told me about during conversations and interviews[1]. While I found some significant differences in the strategies of action used by connected and detached mothers; as hypothesized, I found a strikingly similar set of cultural resources that were shared by all of the Mexican immigrant mothers which was not significantly affected by either the location of their upbringing or their social class. Furthermore, with the exception of decision-making and collaborating with the community, these capacities included behaviors and beliefs that were aligned with Epstein's (1995, 2001) six types of parent involvement and the parental behaviors stipulated in NCLB. What separated one parent from another were not the cultured capacities available to them as part of their repertoires, but rather the strategies of action that were the result of ***choice***.

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[1] It should be noted that it does not matter whether or not what parents expressed during interviews about their behaviors at home are actually true or if they believe all of the statements they made. The cultured capacities exist within their repertoire for all things that they are able to articulate. For them, only those ideas and actions that they cannot describe do not exist.

This is a significant finding because it seems to imply that educators who hope to increase parent participation need to consider implementing different strategies based on the cultured capacities available to the parents at their site. The approach schools must utilize to introduce a new cultured capacity is significantly different from one that hopes to simply activate a capacity that already exists or modify the application of one in a new setting. For example, all mothers understood and were experienced with daily homework assignments. While some of the detached mothers did not agree with the amount or the importance placed on it by teachers in the U.S., they all were familiar with the concept and it was part of their cultural repertoire. Conversely, the notion of parents and school personnel sitting down together as equal partners to make decisions about the school's budget and plans for the future was not even within the realm of possibility for most of the mothers, including those most connected with the school. A school's plan to intensify a parent's commitment to homework would look quite different from its plan to introduce shared decision making.

My interviews and conversations concur with the findings of the growing body of research which finds that most families, including Latinos, value education (Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Chavkin, 1993; Ritter et al., 1993). All the mothers I spoke to said that education was important to them and their children's future. However, I found that connected mothers were more likely to actively engage in cultural work by choosing strategies of action that were shaped by their views of self and who they wanted to be while detached mothers generally did not. The thoughts and feelings of several connected mothers seemed to have developed into what might best be described as a new worldview. For them, it was not enough to simply think or feel that education was important; their strategies of action were continually being guided by these thoughts. It was as if the formal education of their children had become a driving force in their lives. I contend that a key to understanding the contradictory views often expressed by researchers and practitioners in the literature as to whether or not Latinos value education may actually be the result of a thin line of action that is the result of a worldview that not only stipulates how the world works, but how one should act in it.

Regardless of the worldview, my interviews with Mexican immigrant mothers made it clear that no matter how timid or humble a mother may have appeared, she had strong personal views on teachers, the school, and the direction she and her family were headed in life. While overall there certainly was an underlying respect for educators, this respect did not translate into blind acceptance of everything that educators presented. In fact, the majority of Mexican immigrant mothers in this study expressed a belief that schools were better in Mexico than the U.S.; a belief that I had not encountered in the existing literature on the parental participation of Mexican immigrant families and, in fact, contradicts pervasive cultural tropes in the U.S. society about why individuals choose to immigrate to the United States.

The low turnouts at educational events that school personnel purportedly felt were important is evidence of the agency employed by the immigrant mothers in my study with regards to their children's education. Surely, the attendance at the Literacy or Math Night would have been as large as that of the winter program if immigrants were only simpletons who merely followed the directives of American educators. They made choices about the use of their time and resources. They chose not to attend poorly conducted meetings and events that they did not think would meet their needs.

Socializing and Community Building as a Type of Parental Involvement

My findings, likewise, suggest that culture's role in the participation of Mexican immigrant parents cannot fully be accounted for in Epstein's (1995, 2001) Six Types of Involvement for Parents. While the vast majority of data I collected regarding the strategies of action and cultured capacities of the parents at Orange Elementary did find a place in one or more of the six types, there was also a significant amount of data that could not be accounted for by using them. I identified a seventh type of involvement that I labeled as "socializing" due to the emphasis placed on social interactions, entertainment, and community building. Unlike other topics where connected mothers were usually more articulate and thoughtful about their responses, here I found that detached mothers actually had more to say. Based on my data, I propose that this seventh type may actually serve as a catalyst for involvement in the other six types, and it might be a means for strengthening connections with the school. In the same way that Epstein's types are engineered to make homes more *school-like*, by making some U.S. schools with large Mexican-heritage populations more *Mexican-like,* we may actually be able to increase parent involvement as well as goodwill from the Mexican immigrant families we service.

External Constraints on Culture

While it is clear that the cultured capacities or “tools” that a select group of Mexican immigrant mothers possessed and were able to utilize was vital for constructing strategies of actions, the availability of these tools was not the only influence that shaped their decisions to carry out a particular line of action. I have shown how other external or societal processes such as codes, contexts, and institutions were are able to systematize cultural meanings and mediate their influence on actions. In fact, my findings support Swidler’s (2001) assertion that these external constraints can have a “powerful causal influence on action” when they are combined with one’s own inner cultural repertoire (p. 161).

Perhaps the most influential external constraint on culture that I established from the data I collected at Orange Elementary was that of semiotic codes, or the “systems of meaning that define what our actions will mean to others” (Swidler, 2001, p. 179). I found that parents’ actions could be influenced by widely disseminated semiotic codes when they became part of the cultural resources available to parents. This finding coincides with Swidler’s claim that an individual’s decision to choose a course of action may be based upon how certain actions will be perceived by others rather than a deeply held belief. Culture shapes action both through deeply held inner beliefs as well as powerful messages from society that are able to shape how those actions will be interpreted by others.

While I concur with Swidler (2001) that “well-publicized cultural codes” have the potential for changing strategies of action by redefining its meaning (p.7), I demonstrated that this rarely occurred at Orange Elementary except indirectly through modeling. The principal, who was the individual best situated to publicize new cultural codes and redirect action, only used school events and public meetings to repeat previously disseminated school procedures or to make announcements concerning upcoming events. Neither the principal nor the teachers took advantage of the opportunities to widely publicize semiotic codes that could have changed parent behaviors and improved the home-school connections. The institutional leaders never presented a vision for the school and a message about the importance of education or instructions on how parents could help their children become more successful academically.

Contextually, I showed that the homogeneity of the school population and the community seemed to work as a buffer to protect them from some of the contextual crises they might otherwise have faced. The school community appeared unaffected, perhaps in part due to a lack of information, by sliding test scores, or a host of other challenges such as SED, ELL status, and achievement gaps. The relatively static environment they experienced may have kept them from contending with the important academic issues that were present at the school.

Finally, I addressed why certain cultural norms were followed almost universally, like daily start times and ingress and egress procedures, and why other norms, such as volunteering at school and attending school meetings, were only followed by a handful of parents. I showed that both physical structures like fences and room sizes as well as organization practices in the form of policies and procedures had an impact on the behaviors and practices of parents. I illustrated that when institutions fail to shape behavior, behaviors, even if unwanted, nonetheless take place.

Contributions to the Literature and Future Research

I concur with the implication of Epstein's classifications made by Mattingly, et al. (2002) that "increasing parent involvement requires changing the behavior of both parents and school personnel" (p.551). This might begin with the avoidance of inaccurate terms like "involved" or "uninvolved" to describe parents at a school site. Even with the addition of the prepositional phrase "at school," these terms often imply an either/or status rather than the continuum of behaviors and beliefs that I discovered during my research. All parents demonstrated qualities that could be described as involved and uninvolved at various stages of the study.

If educators want to increase the involvement of parents at the school then they must provide parents with a mechanism for engaging in volunteer work. A school that fails to provide and promote activities, like the Thursday Volunteers gatherings at Orange Elementary, may not realize the extent to which parents are willing to go to improve the education for all children. The Mexican immigrant mothers in this study demonstrated their commitment to the school and all students by helping any teacher at the school, regardless of their own child's age or classroom. The meaning they ascribed to their behavior was confirmed again and again in my interviews with them. They told me that they were involved to make Orange Elementary a better place for children, and they were willing to use their time and abilities to help anyone who needed it. Schools that fail to provide these kinds of opportunities for parents to participate might not realize that they are capable of these kinds of behaviors and thus judge them erroneously. Having said that, it would be a mistake for educators to take the commitment of connected mothers to education and the school for granted. I found that connected mothers were just as capable of choosing to withhold their involvement as they were to employ it.

While not attempting to defend or condemn the validity of the views of the mothers in this study who expressed their belief that schools are better in Mexico than in the United States, it is important for educators to understand these views, or, at the very least, recognize that they exist or they may operate under the mistaken premise that one of the reasons that Mexican immigrant parents have come to the U.S. is for the formal education of their children. The mothers in my study made it clear that while they are pleased that schooling, including meals and supplies, is free, and that their children are able to learn English in U.S. schools, if they had their preference, they would overwhelming choose to send their children to school in Mexico.

The thin line of action which separated connected mothers from detached mothers was result of a decision that connected mothers made based on their worldview. One way that educators may be able to influence the actions of parents is by altering their worldview through the dissemination of semiotic codes that define the meaning of one’s behavior to others. The policies at RVUSD and Orange Elementary did exist, but they were clearly not disseminated in a way that had any effect on behavior. If these institutions were to highly publicize these documents in meaningful ways for parents, the result may be quite different.

Based on both the findings and limitations of this study, there are a number of areas where additional research is indicated. The first being, as was mentioned above, the effects of highly publicizing semiotic codes in the form of parent involvement policies. Would the proposed benefits of new policies be more apparent if the institutions creating them did a better job of disseminating them? Or would the school obtain better results if they chose a targeted behavior and then, with single vision, promoted it throughout the year at every available opportunity?

Additionally, a study that attempts to document the effects of school sponsored “socializing,” the seventh type of involvement for parents that I proposed for working with Mexican immigrant populations, on Epstein’s (1995, 2001) other six types would be beneficial. Does school sponsored socializing act as a catalyst for other forms of involvement? Furthermore, are the effects different for parents whose cultured capacities include school sponsored socializing and those for whom it does not?

Finally, since this study was conducted at a fairly homogenous elementary school, future research might look at how Mexican immigrant parents use their cultural repertories differently in a secondary school setting. Also, to confirm the usefulness of Swidler’s (1985, 2001) model for understanding how culture is used by parents to make choices about involvement, studies might be conducted in both less homogenous settings or in schools that have a different ethnoracial group of students and parents.

This ethnographic case study has only begun to scratch the surface on how Mexican immigrant mothers use their cultured capacities to construct strategies of action in the formal education of their children in the United States. Understanding why some Mexican immigrant parents routinely choose to participate in the school affairs of their children while others with similar characteristics and backgrounds do not is a vital step toward producing the kinds of policies and programs that will work to eliminate achievement gaps. Schools are often eager to change the behavior of parents, but are they as willing to make unconventional changes to their own practices in order to meet the needs of their students and their families?

Practical Applications

The theoretical basis for this study and findings has been presented above. This section is reserved for issues relating to my interest in the practical side of parent involvement and my desire to improve my own school, and, hopefully, those like mine. Based on the major findings presented in this chapter as well as the data presented throughout this paper, I suggest that schools and districts consider the following recommendations when working with Mexican immigrant parents. Many of these recommendations will also apply to parents in general, especially in areas characterized by high SED and ELL populations.

I want to begin by emphasizing how important it is for educators to recognize that if, as I found above, a large percentage of immigrant Mexican parents believe that schools and the school system is better in Mexico than the USA then we need to make a significant shift in the way we approach our work with these parents. If we fail to acknowledge their perspective, not only will we risk misinterpreting their words and actions, but it is more than likely that our words and actions will be misunderstood or dismissed by them as well.

If we want to effectively express our perspective, it is important that we begin by understanding theirs. To start, what did these immigrant parents *not* like about schools in the USA? They mentioned the following:

- Failure to teach basic math skills—especially multiplication tables
- Students use calculators/nothing is memorized
- Students who are not at grade level are not retained (and should be retained indefinitely)
- Lack of tracking
- Classroom discipline
- Homework that was “never explained”
- Uniforms are not mandatory
- Teachers miss a lot of school to attend trainings and students get substitutes

In addition to the above points, detached parents also added:

- Teachers have not been taught how to teach (they have a lot of materials, but they don’t know how to use them)
- Teachers don’t all speak Spanish

Furthermore, many of the most involved parents felt that they were in fact “sacrificing their children’s education” to be here, but it was worth it for the jobs and the chance to learn English.

Yet the opinions of the Mexican immigrant parents in my study were not all negative. Here is what they said that they did like about schools in the U.S.:

- School is free, including all textbooks, materials and supplies, as well as breakfast and lunch
- Teachers do not hit the students (although not everyone thought this was a good thing)
- Smaller class sizes

- Personal attention given to the child

Initially, many of these opinions may be disturbing, even shocking, to U.S. educators. However, before we go about changing their minds, we need to begin by thoughtfully considering what they have expressed. Is there any validity to what they, almost universally, think? We need to take care that we do not dismiss all of their points by focusing in on those areas such as the desire of some that teachers all learn Spanish. Have schools in the U.S. placed too much emphasis on technology rather than stressing the value of simple rote memory with basic skills like math facts? Do schools take into consideration the impact of professional development opportunities that take teachers out of the classroom, leaving a substitute teacher in charge? If we are going to tout the value of educators and parents working together as equal partners, it behooves us to realize what they really think.

Other concerns may need to be addressed differently. I have found little emphasis in the literature on the need for public schools to highlight their strengths when working with parents and the communities. District and school leadership must do a much better job at public relations if we are going to secure the support of our stakeholders. All school personnel should not only be well informed about the facts concerning verifiable successes, but they need to be able to express them effectively and frequently. On the other hand, schools need to honestly face challenges and setbacks, securing the help of parents and the community. Schools must also adequately and frequently address parent concerns such as discipline and retention policies. Schools must adequately inform parents of school behavior plans, and provide reasons for and against the practice of retention. As this study makes clear, it is not enough for school personnel to simply make a declaration and hope that parents accept it blindly. We must provide empirical data that builds a strong case and addresses their concerns.

Finally, there are some parent involvement basics that should be part of the repertoires of all schools wanting to connect effectively with parents during school meetings and events. While these essentials may not be original with this study, all of them were either noted or sorely missed during my observation of official meetings and school events at Orange Elementary. I will begin with what I consider to be the "must haves" and will end with additional suggestions that are necessary for schools wanting to take their parent meetings to the next level.

Parent Meetings "Must Haves"

- Parents must know about the meeting (i.e., advertising).
- There must be food of some kind as well as something to drink. The better the food item(s) the more likely they will be to look forward to attending in the future.
- The must take place at a convenient time for parents.
- You must offer babysitting (even for one child) or risk having your meeting disrupted.
- There must be translation for non-English speakers.
- You must use a microphone if there are more than even a handful of parents, especially if the meeting takes place in a large room or auditorium. Many administrators feel they are loud enough to be heard over other distracting noises and they are not.
- You must give honest respect to all those in attendance. Parents are able to quickly discern if your feelings are feigned.

Additional Suggestions for Effective Parent Meetings

- Make the meeting interesting and relevant to their needs.
- Do not do all the talking. Plan for a variety of presenters and speakers, including planned opportunities for parents to participate. Similarly, do not comment on everyone else's comment.
- Stick to the agenda whenever possible. Avoid tangents that extend the length of the meeting and are often ill-prepared.

- Recognize that less is more. Rushing to say too much in one meeting is not an effective technique for communicating a clear message.
- Whenever possible, use visual aids such as realia, Power Point presentations, and overhead projectors. These tools aide retention and maintain attention.
- Plan activities and questions that demand audience participation. When asking a question, give the audience time to respond. Check frequently for audience understanding.
- Have a core message. If you do not have anything important to say, see if you can postpone the meeting. Then get out among the stakeholders. Talk and listen to people. Read a book or magazine. Do whatever it takes to find something that is worth meeting about rather than simply meeting to fulfill compliance requirements.
- Articulate your message well. Be clear. Be specific. Provide your audience with comprehensible data.
- Do not be afraid to express your expectations. Tell people what you want from them, the staff, the students, and yourself. Do not apologize for asking them to help their children with homework, to volunteer at the school, to give donations, or to get involved in other activities. They may not always be able to do as you ask, but as with any relationship, failure to make explicit one's expectations will often lead to disappointment. Parents cannot read your mind.
- Do your best to inspire your audience. (¡Sí se puede! You can do it!)
- Practice what you preach. All parent involvement efforts will be sabotaged by the smallest hint of hypocrisy.

The findings of this study concur with the growing literature on parent involvement which finds that parents from all groups value education and care about the academic success of their children. Furthermore, this study also seems to indicate that some Mexican immigrant mothers possess the cultured capacities for the kinds of involvement that research has shown to improve academic achievement and potentially reduce gaps in achievement. Finally, institutions, like schools, may have the ability to impact the strategies of action chosen by parents when they widely disseminate semiotic codes, especially when working with immigrant populations who are unfamiliar with the educational expectations of schools in the United States.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Parent Interview Questions (English)

Appendix B: Preguntas de Entrevistas para Padres (Spanish)

Appendix C: Staff Interview Questions

Appendix A: Parent Interview Questions (English)

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of Mexican immigrant parents and their educational experiences in both Mexico and the United States. I am asking several parents from Mexico to tell me what they think about schools in Mexico and the U.S. How are the schools different and how are they the same? I want to understand your perspective on education and the importance of school for your children. I'm interested in what you believe and care about. (Note: The interviews should flow naturally as in a friendly conversation. Rapport with the interviewee will need to be established before interview questions can begin. Questions do not need to be asked in any strict order, but should mirror the ebb and flow of the conversation—following up interesting answers with additional non-scripted or out of order questions.)

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1) BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Where are did you grow up?

Describe your family.

What was your childhood like?

When did you come to the U.S.?

What made you decide to come?

2) PARENTS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT

What was school like for you when you were growing up?

What influence did your parents have on your schooling (education)?

How did your parents/family interact with the school?

Describe your relationship with your child's teacher/principal/others?

Why types of activities do you do with your children?

What are your child's strengths and weaknesses?

How is s/he doing at school? How do you know?

What is his/her reading level?

3) SCHOOL - FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Where do you get most of your information about your child's schooling?

How does language impact your communication with school personnel?

In what ways does the school communicate with you?

How do you learn about school events/activities/dates?

How often do you receive information from informal communication sources (other parents, verbal student messages)?

On average, how many hours of TV do you watch each day? What are your favorite shows?

What have you learned about American schools from the TV?

4) WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

How often do you get correspondence from the school?

How would you describe the written documents?

Are they clearly written? Are they understandable?

If your child was having a problem with reading (or math), what would you do?

What would you do if s/he was having a problem with another student?

Do you understand the uniform complaint procedure?

5) VALUES

In your opinion, how important is formal education for your child's future?

What other kinds of education do you feel are important (i.e., on the job training)?

What part (role) should (do) parents have in the schooling/education of their child?

Do you think most parents do what they should do to ensure their child’s success?

What is the role of the school?

Are there any areas of overlap between what parents do and what teachers do?

Are there any areas of your child’s education that parents and teachers work together on?

What kind of a reputation does your child’s school/teacher have?

Describe a good parent in Mexico.

How would you compare the Mexican and American educational system? Overall, which one is better? Why? In what ways?

6) POLICY: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (Que Ningún Niño Se Quede Atrás)

What do you know about NCLB?

Do you believe that the local community or the federal and/or state government should have the greatest amount of influence over local schools?

What should the role of the federal\/state government be?

Do most parents have enough information to make good decisions concerning schools or should decisions be left to experts (teachers, administrators, district officials)?

7) GENERAL SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION QUESTIONS

What are the biggest problems facing our schools today? Our children?

What do you know about statewide testing? The California Standards Test/STAR and CAT 6?

Do you know how your child did last year?

What should your child be doing to get ready for this year’s tests?

What do you know about the California State Content Standards?

Do you know what your child needs to do to graduate from high school?

Do you know what your child needs to do to go to college?

What is a parent’s proper role in schooling?

Why do you think that some students do better than other students in school?

How does schooling affect future jobs and careers?

How are the roles of fathers and mothers the same? Different? Who is most involved in your child’s schooling?

Appendix B: Preguntas de Entrevistas para Padres (Spanish)

INTRODUCCION

Este es un estudio de padres inmigrantes Mexicanos y sus experiencias educativas en ambos paises, Mxico y Estados Unidos. Les estoy preguntando a varios padres de Mexico que me digan que piensan sobre las escuelas de Mexico y de Estados Unidos. ¿Como las escuelas son diferentes y como son iguales? Yo quiero enternder sus perspectiva en la educación y la importancia de la escuela para sus hijos. Yo estoy interesado en lo que ustedes creen y les importa. (Nota: Las entrevistas deberán de transcurrir naturalmente como en una conversación amigable. La charla con la persona entrevistada necesitará ser establecida antes de que las preguntas de la entrevista puedan dar comienzo. Las preguntas no necesitan ser hechas en cualquier orden estricto, pero deberán de reflejar la trama y el flujo de la conversación - seguido de respuestas interesantes con preguntas adicionales que no esén ensayadas o fuera de orden.)

1) INFORMACION DE ANTECEDENTES

¿Me puede decir un poco sobre usted?

¿Donde creció?

Describa a su familia.

¿Como fue su infancia?

¿Cuándo vino a los Estados Unidos?

¿Qué hizo que usted decidiera venir?

2) LA EXPERIENCIA ESCOLAR DE LOS PADRES COMO UN ESTUDIANTE

¿Como era la escuela para usted cuando usted estaba creciendo?

¿Que influencia tuvieron sus padres en su educación?

¿Como interactuaron su familia/padres con su escuela/educación?

Describa su relación con el maestro/a/director/a/otras personas de su hijoja.

¿Que tipos de actividades hace con sus hijos?

¿Cuales son los dominios y las debilidades de su hijo/a?

¿Como se desempeña el/ella en la escuela? ¿Como se da cuenta?

¿Cuál es el nivel de lectura de el/ella?

3) COMUNICACION ENTRE LA ESCUELA Y LA FAMILIA

¿Donde obtiene la mayoría de su información sobre la educación de su hijo/a?

¿Como el lenguaje impacta su comunicación con el personal de la escuela?

¿De que modos se comunica la escuela con usted?

¿Como se da cuenta sobre las actividades/eventos/fechas de la escuela?

¿Que tan seguido recibe información de parte de fuentes informales de comunicación (otros padres, mensajes verbales del estudiante)?

Por lo general, ¿Cuántas horas de televisión ve usted cada día? ¿Cuales son sus programas favoritos?

¿Que ha aprendido usted sobre las escuelas Americanas por parte de la televisión?

4) DOCUMENTOS ESCRITOS

¿Qué tan seguido obtiene correspondencia por parte de la escuela?

¿Como describiría usted los documentos escritos?

¿Están claramente escritos? ¿Se entienden?

Si su hijo/a estuviera teniendo un problema con la lectura (o matemáticas), qué haría usted?

¿Que haría si l/ella tuviera un problema con otro estudiante?

¿Entiende usted el procedimiento uniforme de queja?

5) VALORES

En su opinión, ¿que tan importante es la educación formal para el futuro de su hijo/a?

¿Qué otras clases de educación piensa usted que son importantes)Ej:, entrenamiento en el trabajo)?

¿Qué parte (papel) deberán los padres (de tener) en la educación/escuela de su hijo/a?

¿Piensa usted que la mayoría de los padres hacen lo que deberían de hacer para asegurar el éxito de su hijo/a?

¿Cual es el papel de la escuela?

¿Hay algunas áreas de entrelace entre lo que los padres hacen y lo que los maestros hacen?

¿Hay algunas áreas de la educación de su hijo/a en que los padres y maestros deberán de trabajar juntos?

¿Qué clase de reputación tiene el maestro/escuela de su hijo/a?

Describa a un buen padre de familia en México.

¿Cómo compararía usted el sistema educativo Americano y Mexicano? En general, ¿Cuál es mejor? ¿Por qué? ¿de qué modos?

6) POLIZA: QUE NINGUN NINO SE QUEDE ATRAS

¿Qué sabe usted sobre el NCLB?

¿Cree usted que la comunidad local o el gobierno estatal y/o federal debería de tener la mayoría de la influencia sobre las escuelas locales?

¿Cuál debería de ser el papel del gobierno estatal/federal?

¿Tienen suficiente información los padres para hacer buenas decisiones con respecto a las escuela o las decisiones deberian de ser para los expertos (maestros, administradores, oficiales del distrito)?

7) CONOCIMIENTO ESCOLAR GENERAL Y PREGUNTAS DE OPINION

¿Cuales son los problemas más grandes que encaran nuestras escuelas/hijos el día de hoy?

¿Qué sabe usted sobre los exámenes a nivel del estado? El Examen de Normas de California/STAR y CAT 6?

¿Sabe como se desempeñó su hijo/a el año pasado?

¿Qué deberá de estar haciendo su hijo/a para estar listo/a para los exámenes de este año?

¿Qué sabe usted sobre las Normas de Contenido del Estado de California?

¿Sabe usted lo que su hijo/a necesita para poderse graduar de escuela secundaria?

¿Sabe usted lo que su hijo/a necesita para poder ir a la universidad?

¿Cuál es el papel apropiado de un padre de familia en la educación?

¿Por qué piensa que algunos estudiantes se desempeñan mejor que otros estudiantes en la escuela?

¿Como la educación afecta los trabajos y carreras futuras?

¿Como los papeles de los padres y madres son los mismos? ¿Diferentes? ¿Quien es la persona más involucrada en la educación de su hijo/a

Appendix C: Staff Interview Questions

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of Mexican immigrant parents and their educational experiences in both Mexico and the United States. In addition to interviews that I am holding with Mexican immigrant parents, I am also interested in learning about the experiences and views of the teachers and other school personnel who work with immigrant parents and their children in the United States. I want to understand your perspective on education and the importance of parent participation in the school. What have you noticed about the participation of different parents and/or groups of parents? I'm interested in what you believe and have observed of the parents at this school. (Note: The interviews should flow naturally as in a friendly conversation. Rapport with the interviewee will need to be established before interview questions can begin. Questions do not need to be asked in any strict order, but should mirror the ebb and flow of the conversation—following up interesting answers with additional non-scripted or out of order questions.)

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1) BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Where are did you grow up?

Describe your family.

What was your childhood like?

Were you, your parents, raised in the U.S./California? If not, when did you/they come to the U.S./California?

How long have you been in education?

Why did you decide to go into education?

If you had it to do over again, would you go into education or would you choose something else?

2) STAFF MEMBER'S SCHOOL EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT

What was school like for you when you were growing up?

What influence did your parents have on your schooling (education)?

How did your parents/family interact with the school?

For staff members who are also parents

Describe your relationship with your child's teacher/principal/others?

Why types of activities do you do with your children?

How is s/he doing at school? How do you know?

What is his/her reading level?

3) SCHOOL - FAMILY COMMUNICATION

In what ways does the school communicate with parents?

How do they learn about school events/activities/dates?

How does language impact your communication with parents?

How often do you meet informally with parents?

Who usually initiates these encounters?

What is the topic(s) most frequently discussed during these encounters?

4) WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

How often does the school/the teacher send correspondence to the students' homes?

How would you describe these documents (language, neatness, grammar, understandable…)?

What percentage of school/teacher documents are sent out in both English and Spanish?

How often do you/the school receive written communication from the homes?

How would you describe it (language, neatness, grammar, purpose …)?

How does the school solicit comments from the parents?

Is there a suggestion box? What suggestions have parents made this year? Who monitors it?

Do you understand the uniform complaint procedure?

5) VALUES

What is the difference between schooling and education?

In your opinion, how important is formal education for a child’s future?

What other kinds of education do you feel are important (i.e., on the job training)?

Describe a good parent.

What part (role) should (do) parents have in the schooling/education of their child?

Do you think most parents do what they should do to ensure their child’s success?

What is the role of the school?

Are there any areas of overlap between what parents do and what teachers do?

Are there any areas of a child’s education that parents and teachers work together on?

What kind of a reputation does the school have?

How would you compare the Mexican and American educational system? Overall, which one is better? Why? In what ways?

Describe a good immigrant parent.

6) POLICY: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (Que Ningún Niño Se Quede Atrás)

What do you know about NCLB?

Do you believe that the local community or the federal and/or state government should have the greatest amount of influence over local schools?

What should the role of the federal/state government be?

Do most parents have enough information to make good decisions concerning schools or should decisions be left to experts (teachers, administrators, district officials)?

7) GENERAL SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION QUESTIONS

What are the biggest problems facing our schools today? Our children?

What can/should the school do to increase parent involvement?

What kinds of parent participation do you notice at school?

Do you notice differences between immigrants and non-immigrants?

Do you notice differences between different immigrant parents?

Why do you think that they act differently?

How are the roles of fathers and mothers the same? Different? Who is most involved in your child's schooling?

What is a parent's proper role in schooling?

Why do you think that some students do better than other students in school?