PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF U.S.-BORN LATINO PARENTS IN A HIGH-POVERTY URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT IN RELATION TO THEIR ROLE IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

A Dissertation

by

SYLVIA RAMIREZ REYNA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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December 2008

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions and Experiences of U.S.-Born Latino
Parents in a High-Poverty Urban School District in Relation to Their Role in the
Education of Their Children. (December 2008)
Sylvia Ramirez Reyna, B.A., Incarnate Word College; M.A., The University of
Texas at San Antonio
Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Kathryn Bell McKenzie

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive research study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of seven second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district in Texas regarding their role in their children's schooling. Specifically, this study was organized to understand what the selected Latino parents perceived as parent involvement, what expectations they had of the school and, conversely, what expectations the school personnel had of them, and finally, what perceptions the parents held about their role in school-parent activities.

Though parent involvement is considered to be one of the most important factors in a child's success in school, this study also explored the perceived chasm in the alignment between the school and the home of the U.S.-born Latino family. The interpretative approach and dialogical exchange, through a semi-structured interview process, provided the opportunity to add the voices of second- and third-generation U.S.–born Latino parents to the current discourse about parent involvement.

All of the participants met a general description as a second- or third-generation U.S.-born Latino, whose primary language is English, whose children have been involved in the identified school system for at least five years and were academically successful, and who the school considered to be uninvolved in the schooling process.

The data analysis process involved a methodical process of breaking down the information presented in in-depth interview transcripts, observation, field notes, documents, and participant and researcher texts. By using a focused coding technique, patterns or concepts that best represented the participants' voices surfaced. The codes were reviewed and categories or themes were then developed.

The parents' voices also provided information suggesting that the perceived lack of participation in the sanctioned school activities by some U.S.–born Latino parents stems from an apparent failure on the part of school personnel to recognize the cultural capital and richness of the culturally diverse household. Specifically, through the theoretical framework of *funds of knowledge*, the stories of the seven second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latinos noted that Latino families have assets that contribute to the academic success of their children, yet they are often dismissed by school personnel.

DEDICATION

As a child, I enjoyed the unconditional love of my father, brother and mother. Though they were taken from me much too early, during our time together, each shared valuable lessons and I was kept warm in the loving arms of family. I know that they would have been so proud of my accomplishment—thank you Daddy, Mama and René.

My family is precious to me and I am most thankful for the love of my husband, Arthur, and my children, Arthur III and Adrian. Arthur, together we have enjoyed a meaningful life filled with love for each other, our children, family and friends and directed by our responsibility to serve others before ourselves. I am grateful for all of the moments we have shared and the life lessons we have learned. I know that without your love, encouragement and help, my journey would not have been possible—with all my love, thank you.

To my children, Arthur III and Adrian, daily you remind me what is important. I am so proud of the young men you have grown to be. I know that with your strong moral courage and character, coupled with your unwavering sense of service to others, you will leave a remarkable impression on this world. Thank you for being the sons of my dreams.

Each of you, Arthur, Arthur III, and Adrian have taught me the true meaning of love—again, thank you for always being at my side. I love you with all of my heart.

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I extend my sincerest appreciation to the many persons who helped me reach a personal and professional goal. A special note of gratitude to my committee chairperson, Dr. Kathryn Bell McKenzie, who exemplifies the definition of an excellent teacher and mentor. Her dynamic teaching style and relentless demand for excellence rekindled my passion for social justice and re-energized me to continue my efforts to ensure that all children receive an excellent and equitable education.

Each of my class experiences, under the direction of Dr. Kathryn Bell McKenzie, Dr. John Hoyle, Dr. Mario Torres, Dr. Julian Trevino, and Dr. Gonzalo Garcia, Jr., enriched my knowledge of educational theory and practice, and I am grateful to have been a participant in their forward-thinking classes. I extend a special note of thanks to Dr. Jim Scheurich, Dr. Linda Skrla, Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson and Dr. Julian H. Trevino for their leadership and, more specifically, for serving as members of my committee.

Special memories about the journey to Texas A&M University and efforts to secure a degree will last a lifetime because of my classmate and extraordinary friend, Claudia Rodriguez—we are forever bonded as colleagues and friends. To my posse (the best friends in the world), Deborah and John Guardia, Willie Mae Taylor, Carol Fairman Hernandez, Nancy Nasif, Janice Hannon, and Hilda Salas, thank you for your friendship, love, and patience. I know that your support over the years sustained me during difficult times and that our friendship makes my life richer everyday.

Also, to my special circle of friends and relatives who always provided a shoulder on which to lean, Connie D. Rocha, The Honorable Andy and Margaret Mireles, Rachel Ponce, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur C. Reyna, and Elvira Puig Barrera, thank you and much love. Lastly, to Dr. Rubén D. Olivárez, thank you for allowing me to develop professionally. Through your mentorship and support, I have been able to accomplish many of my personal and professional goals.

¡Con mucho cariño--mil gracias a todos!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My experiences as a third-generation U.S.-born Mexican-American educator in a predominantly Mexican-American urban school district have provided much first-hand knowledge from which to draw topics to explore. Compelled by a constant angst about the academic failure of Latino students, I am intrigued by the role of parents[1] in the schooling process of their children. My interest in understanding the role of the Latino parent in the schooling process is propelled by my perception that some teachers and administrators grant themselves a broad-based absolution of and seem to disavow any responsibility for their students' academic failure, yet summarily accept the accolades associated with the students' academic success—a paradox. Further, in my experiences, educators seem to lay an overwhelming blame upon the parents and families of the children they teach, most often citing the educators' perceived deficiencies of the family and the home (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Valencia & Black, 2002) as prime reasons for the students' academic failure.

The style and format for this dissertation follow that of the *Journal of Educational Research*.

In addition to the educators' placement of blame on the Latino families for the students' academic failure is the sounding of the ubiquitous phrase of *if only* as it streams throughout the conversations held by educators about why Latino students are failing to meet academic standards. *If only the parents would take part*; *if only they would help me teach their children*; *if only they cared about their children*; and *if only I could make them change* are complaints that dominate conversations in local schools and in school district offices (Lopez, 2001).

Statement of Problem

Since 1990, the incursion of Latinos in the United States has substantially changed the complexion of the populous and of the classrooms. In 2000, according to the U.S. Census Department, some 35.2 million Latinos (Hispanics)[2] were living in the United States, representing approximately 12.5 % of the total U.S. population of 281.4 million. Among Hispanic or Latino groups, Mexicans represented the largest group with approximately 20.9 million (59.3 %), while other Hispanics (15.7%) and Puerto Ricans (9.7%) represented the second and third largest groups, respectively (Ramirez, 2004). In 2007, the population figures for Hispanics in the United States showed a significant increase and indicated that some 45.5 million Hispanics now represent approximately 15.1 % of the estimated total U.S. population of 301.6 million (Bernstein, 2008). Inasmuch as the population of Latinos is changing and classrooms now have more Latino students enrolled in school than any other minority group (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002), a review of the academic performance of Latino students merits discussion.

According to Ramirez and de la Cruz (2002), Latino students are performing at academically lower levels than their white counterparts and, specifically, Latino students under perform at almost every grade level and in every subject area. The apparent disparity in the academic performance of Latino students and their non-Latino counterparts, has ignited an academic debate about this gap and has, over time, focused on understanding the reasons for or explaining why Latino children, for the most part, fail in greater numbers than their non-Latino counterparts (Llagas & Snyder, 2003).

Before I can more fully understand the factors that may contribute to the academic failure or success of Latino students; I must first, probe to try to understand those factors that generally contribute to the academic success of all students. In reviewing the research that addressed such factors, academic and social, that contribute to the success of students, I found that a factor often cited as a significant predictor of children's academic success and of particular interest to me is the involvement of the students' parents in the education of their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Comer, 1984; Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 1989). The literature specifically mentions that positive outcomes of parental involvement include better attendance, behaviors that are consistent with the expectations of the school, higher completion rates of homework and other assignments, and a lesser probability of dropping out of school (Epstein, 2001).

As noted, if parental involvement is a significant predictor of a student's academic success and Latino students are not performing well academically, then understanding how Latino parents construct involvement in their children's education presents an interesting area to explore. In delving into the parental involvement constructs of Latino parents, however, I found that the literature seemed to treat all Latinos as one broad group, regardless of country of origin. Specifically, the literature failed to distinguish the experiences of the various groups under the category of Hispanic or Latino. The federal government even uses broad definitions as is evident in their definition of "Hispanic or Latino as a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. Thus, Hispanics may be any race" (Ramirez, 2004).

The extent to which Latino parents have been essentialized is most conspicuous in the literature especially as it pinpoints those factors that inhibit the participation of Latino parents in the schooling process. Researchers (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Epstein, 1996) have pointed to barriers that Latino families face when engaging with the school, such as the language difference, the lack of experience the Latino families have with the American educational system, and differences in the cultural values of the school and the Latino home. Further, they offered the aforementioned reasons as significant factors leading to the disconnect between the Latino family and the school system and have discussed how this chasm may contribute to the academic failure of the Latino student (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Epstein, 1996). This approach in assessing the perceived lack of parent involvement by Latino parents seems to allow excuses for deficient teaching. In addition, the literature fails to discuss the factors that may be contributing to the academic failure of distinct groups of Latinos inasmuch as the current literature most often discusses the experiences of the immigrant family and rarely speaks to the experiences of second or third generation Latino families.

Moreover, in addition to essentializing Latinos as one broad group, failing to distinguish the cultural differences of the various groups comprising the Latino population, the literature seems focused on the experiences and perceptions of immigrant families; the barriers of language; the struggles they have faced in navigating the American school system; culture; and the struggle to assimilate into the American way of life (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Lopez, 2001), and fails to distinguish the experiences of native-born Latinos from the experiences of immigrant families though native-born Latinos comprise 60% of the present population (Ramirez, 2004).

Specifically, the literature seems to be void of information regarding the experiences of those families who are second or third generation U.S.-born Latino families, who do not have a language barrier and who have lived in the United States all of their lives. Moreover, the literature seems deficient in studying the experiences of those families whose children have matriculated in and experienced the U.S. educational system as students themselves and who are, therefore, aware of the inner workings of the school system. And more pointedly, the literature seems deficient in understanding the experiences of those native-born and English-speaking Latino parents regarding their role in the education of their children.

Further complicating the efforts to understand the experiences of native-born Latino families and their role in the education of their children is the lack of a common definition of parental involvement. Because of the lack of a common definition of what parent involvement is, it follows that there may also be a lack of understanding of the strategies that work to effectively engage parents in the schooling process (Tinkler, 2002). The lack of a common definition and an understanding of what constitutes effective parental involvement may be contributing factors to the educators' perception that parents, specifically, Latino parents, are not engaged in the education of their children because they do not care about the success or failure of their children (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Recognizing that current parent involvement programs struggle to effectively engage Latino parents, I am compelled to learn why this is the case when schools have tried to engage all families, including those that do not have the barriers most often cited in the literature. If the native-born Latino family speaks English, can communicate with school personnel, and has had personal experiences with the school system, then I want to know what inhibits their participation in school parent involvement programs as currently constructed. My concern is further exacerbated because if, as the literature indicates, we know that parent involvement has a positive impact on the academic success of students and that Latino parents care about the success of their children (Valencia & Black, 2002), then, simply stated, a gap should not exist between the school and the home in engaging parents as meaningful partners.

Inasmuch as a gap seems to exist and there is a perceived lack of parental involvement by Latino parents in the school system today, other questions surface and additional research is required. Why does this perception exist? I offer the following three possibilities for consideration as a foundation for my exploration to understand the perceived lack of parental involvement by Latino parents.

First, if schools are working hard to engage parents, as legislated, yet Latino parents seemingly are absent from active participation, perhaps it is the model or framework of parental involvement as defined by the school itself which is faulty. It might be that the traditional parent involvement programs, primarily created in a white middle class context, no longer serve the students in our changing society.

Second, if schools are working exhaustively, as purported, to engage parents as partners in the education of their children, then perhaps the notion offered by some administrators and teachers that Latino parents do not care about their children's education is correct. The question though explored and dispelled by Valencia and Black (2002) merits further exploration to more fully understand whether U.S.-born Latino parents value the education of their children.

Third, perhaps the lack of engagement of Latino parents in the education of their children is due to a misunderstanding on the part of the parents and the teachers of what the other party expects of them and what the other is able to do. Do Latino parents know what to expect of the schools and what is expected of them? Conversely, do the administrators and teachers know what to expect of parents?

Any one or a combination of such possibilities could inform us as to the reasons for the perceived lack of parental involvement by Latino parents in schools today. Various research studies problematizing the possibility of the faultiness of some parent engagement models have been conducted. Lopez (1999), a Latino researcher, concluded in his study of three immigrant and migrant families that traditional models for parent involvement excluded people of color, particularly migrant workers. Delgado-Gaitán (2001), a Latina researcher, also problematized the model of parent involvement in her study in which she concluded that the traditional model of engaging Latino parents impeded their ability to gain a voice in the education of their children.

Other researchers, such as Valencia and Black (2002) and McKenzie and Scheurich (2004), have investigated the notion held by school personnel that Latino parents are not engaged in parent involvement activities because they simply do not care about their children. Still, other researchers, such as Ladson-Billings (1995), Webb-Johnson (2002), and Noguera (2003) have raised the issue of the apparent disconnect between home-culture and school-culture.

The issue, however, lies in the fact that the literature regarding parent involvement and the role of Latino parents in the education of their children from their perspective is limited. Moreover, the study of Latino parents and, more specifically, U.S.-born Latino parents in an urban school system, is even more limited and compels further exploration. Such an exploration into the home-school relationship will, perhaps, bridge the gap that exists between the school and the Latino family.

It was my aim as a U.S.-born Latina educator, through parent voices, to add balance to the discourse about the involvement of U.S.-born Latino parents in the education of their children—they have stories to tell and we can learn from them. This is an exploratory study and focuses on the perceptions and experiences of identified second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district in Texas in relation to their involvement in the schooling process and academic success of their children. I explore the construction of the parents' role in their children's education and the school activities that contribute or prohibit their engagement. Further, this study discusses the possible reasons for the parents' perceived lack of engagement by school personnel. The goal of my research is to provide insights about how parents perceive their role in the education of their children.

Review of Literature

In a review of the current literature regarding the academic achievement of Latino students in today's schools, it was evident that there exists a disparity in their academic performance when compared with the achievement of other students. Generally speaking, Latino youth are the "most under-educated major segment of the U.S. population" (Inger, 1992, p. 1) and are "more than twice as likely to be under-educated than all groups combined" (Chavkin, 1993, p. 1). Moreover, a 2003 report published by the U.S. Department of Labor indicated that Latino students have the highest number of high school dropouts of any major ethnic group in the country.

The literature is replete with theories about the causes of the low academic achievement of Latino youth, including, but not limited to, barriers of language and culture, poverty, low expectations possessed by teachers, racism, genetics, and motivation (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Comer, 1980; Epstein, 1996). Inger (1992) suggested that "there is considerable evidence that parent involvement leads to improved student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates, and that these improvements occur regardless of the economic, racial, or cultural background of the family" (p. 1).

Understanding the literature regarding the link between active parent involvement and increased student achievement, school systems have created a variety of efforts aimed at linking the parent and the school involving a wide-range of parent involvement activities. The extensive variation in the types of activities, however, is due, in part, to a lack of agreement about what constitutes parent involvement. The lack of a consistent definition has also resulted in varying ways in which to determine success (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Trumball, Rothstein-Firsch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). In a study conducted by Scribner et al. (1999), they found that the definition of parent involvement differed between what the teachers thought and what the parents thought. Both the teachers and the parents were from a highly successful, predominantly Latino school in Texas, yet the definitions varied. The teachers defined parent involvement as participation in formal activities, events, meetings, or classroom volunteering. The parents, on the other hand, defined active participation in their child's education in a more informal context. The parents in the study described ways in which they were actively involved that included ensuring that their children did their homework, nurturing their children, insisting that their children were well taken care of, school attendance, and instilling strong cultural and family values. The parent role and purpose, from their perspective, involved "supporting the total well-being of children" (Scribner et al., 1999, p. 37).

Moreover, if, as the literature suggests, school personnel define parent involvement as a parent who participates in formal school activities, such as attendance at PTA meetings, programs, and volunteering, then the school personnel are likely to measure success of their program by the number of parents who attend or participate in such activities. However, if school personnel define successful parental engagement in more informal ways, such as helping students with their homework at night, insisting that their children attend school, and advocating for their child, success is measured differently and may not capture the benefits of the informal activities engaged by the Latino parents (Scribner et al., 1999).

In a study of an immigrant migrant family in Texas conducted by Gerardo Lopez (2001), a different definition of parent involvement is offered. Lopez concluded that traditional definitions of parental involvement excluded people such as migrant workers. He indicated that the migrant family he studied did not engage in the typically-defined parent involvement activities, but, in fact, provided a different dimension. The family in the study, the Padillas, taught their children to appreciate education. Their role in the schooling of their children was to teach them "to appreciate the value of their education through the medium of hard work" (p. 420). They took their children to work in the fields and provided a real-world context in which they demonstrated their belief that the lack of a good education limited their options for better employment: "either work hard at school or work hard in the fields" (p. 420). This study has contributed to an added dimension of parent involvement, "transmission of sociocultural values" (p. 430).

As noted, the differing viewpoints limit the full impact of the contributions of the parents. The inability to have a common understanding about what constitutes success causes misperceptions about what defines an *involved parent* and an *uninvolved parent*. Moreover, the lack of a common definition or understanding about successful parental engagement has contributed to the misinterpretation of parents' non-involvement as a sign of not caring (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992).

Added to the lack of a common definition of parent involvement is the variation in understanding the ways in which parents should be involved in the schooling process. Latino parents, as indicated in several studies (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995), see their role in the education of their child quite differently than the role of the school. The role of the parents is to ensure the total well-being of the child (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995), while the school's role is to impart knowledge (Chavkin, 1991; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). It is understandable then that the traditional and more formal ways of engaging Latino parents in school activities may be at the root of the problem and contribute to these parents' sense of displacement in navigating the school structure. In the Latino culture, for example, teachers are held in high respect (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995) and any type of questioning about grades or assignments may be considered a highly disrespectful act (Chavkin, 1991; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). The differing perceptions about what constitutes parent involvement not only limit an understanding of the contributions that Latino parents make in the education of their children, they contribute to the characterization of Latino parents as uncaring about the education of their children when they are not involved in the ways prescribed by the school.

Variances in the perceptions of what constitutes parent involvement, by teachers and parents, are significant barriers for Latino families, but are not the only constraints faced by Latino parents. The research indicates that additional barriers that Latino parents encounter can be categorized in general themes: the culture and language of the parents, the school climate, previous encounters parents may have had with school, the parents' educational level, and the way in which the school conducts business (Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 2001; Lopez, 2001; Moles, 1993; Scribner et al., 1999; Shannon, 1996).

As described, those factors that may contribute to the Latino parents' perceived lack of engagement in school activities are most often noted as barriers. The voices of teachers and administrators are well documented in the literature. Educators characterize parents who fail to engage in the traditional activities as unengaged and lacking in parental skills, having low academic expectations of their children, or possessing an attitude of non-caring towards their children (Ada & Smith, 1998; Arzubiaga, Ceja, & Artiles, 2000; Valencia & Black, 2002), a deficit-thinking model.

The purpose of this study, however, was to listen to the voices of parents. Engaging the parental voice is important if we, as educators, are to provide equitable and excellent schools, then we must actively engage parents of color as meaningful partners in the education of their children (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study and is exploratory, interpretive, and open-ended. Moreover, the descriptions and conclusions of this study relate only to the context of the urban school in which the research was conducted and cannot, subsequently, be applied to other school settings or systems.

In an effort to add to the body of literature on parent involvement, specifically by U.S.-born Latino parents, this study explored and documented the perceptions and experiences of second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district regarding their role and involvement in the schooling process. Through the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and a deficit model of thinking (Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997), I reviewed the assets of Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district, and called in to question the endogenous theory of blaming the victim or family for any perceived lack of parental involvement (Valencia & Black, 2002). Three questions guided this research: (1) What do the selected parents perceive as parent involvement? (2) What expectations do they have of the school? (3) What perceptions do they hold regarding their role in participating in school-parent activities?

In this study, through an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of Latino parents, I implemented a qualitative research design (Merriam, 2002) inasmuch as the aforementioned research questions required elaborate detail and depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The qualitative research design (Merriam, 2002), of course, was the best method to raise the voices of the parents with whom I engaged and to tell their stories.

Through purposive or purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002), I invited seven U.S.-born Latino parents whose children attend a public school in the selected high-poverty urban school system to participate. Moreover, the detail and depth of qualitative data collection allowed me to interpret the meaning of the conversations with the identified participants, summarize the observations conducted in their environments, and review pertinent documents.

Specifically, each of the seven participants were interviewed, through a semi-structured process (Fontana & Frey, 2005) in their respective homes or in an environment of their choosing on two different occasions for about two hours. Interview questions included the parents' understanding of parent involvement, a description of their interactions with the school, the aspirations they had for their children, the expectations they had of the school, their role in the education of their children, and what they thought the school thought of them. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded.

Trustworthiness was established by triangulating data using various data sources including: verbatim transcriptions of each interview, related school and district documents, reflexive audio journal, and field notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, I ensured the accuracy of the statements made by participants on an ongoing and frequent basis (Merriam, 2002). Moreover, I provided deep rich description of the participants' perceptions and experiences (Glesne & Webb, 1993).

Researcher's Positionality

Inasmuch as this is a qualitative study, and I am the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002), my positionality comes to bear on this study. Though the experiences incorporate the participants' reflections, the conclusions of the study were constructed and interpreted through my lens.

I am a third generation Mexican-American woman who was raised in a household led by a strong female career educator who widowed when I was six years of age. She dedicated her life to the success of her two children, both of whom earned college degrees and became career educators. I know, too, that my interest in understanding the perceptions of Latino parents also stems from trying to understand the role my mother played in my schooling and the role I have played as a mother of two sons in their education. As career educators, neither my mother nor I were able to participate in the traditional constructs provided by schools for our active participation in the schooling process, yet our aspirations for success and the importance of an education were threaded throughout every aspect of our lives.

My interest in the relationship between the home and the school and how that relationship may affect the academic success of students further deepened as a result of experiences throughout my professional career. Over the course of my administrative career, I worked closely with hundreds of parents, predominantly Latino parents in a large urban school district, to engage them in the schooling process. My experiences have contributed to my schema of how educators perceive Latino parents and what they perceive as the parents' role in the schooling process.

By participating in in-depth conversations, observations, and review of documents, it is my hope that new ideas can be found to bridge the gap that seems to exist between U.S.-born Latino homes in an urban traditional school system.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the changing demographics in the United States and argued that the increasing Latino population compels educators to explore ways to ensure their academic success. I argued that, in the literature, Latinos seem to be essentialized as a group and as foreign-born, rendering the native-born, Mexican-American almost invisible.

In trying to understand the factors inhibiting U.S.-born Latino families from engaging with school personnel in the schooling process, I argued that the variations in the definition of what constitutes parental involvement further muddies the issue of effective parental involvement. I showed how the uninvolved Latino parent is considered as such, mostly because of a misperception of what constitutes an involved parent and, perhaps, a failure to recognize the value of the home and the parent's role in the academic success of Latino children.

Chapter II contains a review of literature describing the various typologies of parent involvement and further discusses possible reasons for Latino parents' lack, or perceived lack, of participation in their children's education. Possible reasons included a lack of consistency in the understanding of what constitutes parent involvement and a discussion of the funds of knowledge of the family and of deficit thinking about the parents and their children that may inhibit their participation.

In Chapter III, I articulated the method of inquiry that includes a description of the context of the research, the process for selecting the participants, an introduction of the participants, and the research design. Also explained is the method of data collection and analysis. Chapter III concludes with a description of the processes used to ensure the integrity of the research: trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter IV describes the experiences of the seven participants with the Texas urban school that serves as the context. Their responses to the semi-structured interviews, an analysis of the responses, and interpretation of the data collected summarize Chapter IV.

In Chapter V, the central themes that emerged from the data collected are positioned in the current literature in order to draw conclusions and provide the implications for changes to public policy in order to affect ways that educators can reconstruct the manner in which Latino parents are engaged in the schooling process. It is my hope that the information gathered herein provides a better understanding of the perceptions of U.S.-born Latino parents in relation to their role in the education of their children and spurs conversations with policy makers and school personnel about the value of parents in the schooling journey of their children.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The most significant experiences that frame my perceptions about what works and does not work in helping Latino students achieve academically occurred while serving as a school building principal in a low-performing urban high poverty elementary school in the early 1990s and then serving as a district-level administrator in the same urban school district from 1995 through 2000. My first district-level position focused on strengthening the relationship between parents and school personnel in an effort to improve the academic success of the over 55,000 students of color. Again, perhaps prompted by my first-hand experiences with parents during that time, it is my perception that many school personnel sponsor parent involvement programs only to comply with state and federal mandates rather than from an understanding of the importance of the parent’s role in the education of their children. Further, I suspected that many school teachers and administrators assumed that Latino parents did not care about the education of their children. This assumption was drawn mostly from my experiences in which school personnel expressed belief that Latino parents failed to engage in activities prescribed by the school because they were unappreciative of the school culture, and somehow deficient in their parenting skills.

Inasmuch as native-born Latino families of Mexican-American descent dominate the demographic composition of the school district which serves as a backdrop for this study, I was particularly interested in exploring the parent-school relationship through their voices. To more fully understand the role that U.S.-born Latino parents play in the education of their children, from the Latino parents’ perspective, and to understand how the parent-school relationship may or may not contribute to the success of U.S.-born Latino students in a high-poverty urban school district, I began this review of literature with an overview of the demographic composition of the United States population. I included information about Latinos who immigrate to the United States and Latinos who are U.S.-born. Next, I explored the academic performance of Latino students to uncover any gaps in their academic performance when compared to their non-Latino counterparts. Further, I reviewed parent involvement as a strategy to enhance the academic performance of students. As such, I reviewed two constructs of parent involvement which seem to frame the current discourse regarding the importance of involving parents in the education of their children and what constitutes parent involvement. I then delved into the literature regarding the Latino parents’ perspective of parent involvement and their understanding of their role in the education of their children. As a result, I reviewed the literature which explained the seeming disconnect between the discussed constructs of parent involvement and the Latino parents’ perspective. Finally, I reviewed the literature centered on shifting the practice of how Latino parents are engaged in the schooling process by understanding and valuing the culture and assets of the home.

A Demographic View of Latinos in the United States

The 2000 United States Census Bureau indicated that the Latino population accounted for approximately 12.5% (35.2 million) of the total U.S. population which noted a 61% increase since 1990 when the Hispanic population was approximately 21.9 million (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). In 2002 it was estimated that there were some 38 million Latinos in this country (Chapa & de la Rosa, 2004) and projections by the U.S. Census Bureau conducted in 2001 indicated that the Latino population will almost double by the year 2025, at which point it will represent about 18% of the total U.S. population (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002).

Historically the United States has been a nation comprised of a significant populous of foreign-born citizenry. Though the demographic trends in the United States indicated a steady growth in the Hispanic population over the past 30 years, interestingly, when the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau figures were disaggregated, only 40% of the total Hispanic population indicated that they were born in a foreign country (Ramirez, 2004). The remaining Hispanic population (60%), indicated they were born in the United States, and most indicated Mexico as their country of origin.

In addition to understanding the population growth trends of Latinos in the United States, it was also essential to understand the composition (country of origin) of the various groups to more wholly understand any language or cultural nuances of the various groups comprising the U.S. Latino population. During the 1980 and 1990 census, the federal government collected data in a way that would identify and distinguish the various origins of persons who identified themselves as

Spanish/Hispanic. Specifically, people were asked if they were of *Spanish/Hispanic origin or decent*. If the person indicated so, they were asked to choose Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish/Hispanic (Guzman, 2001). During the next census taking efforts, the term *Latino* emerged and first appeared on the Census form in 2000. Individuals were able to mark *other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino* and had additional space to write their Hispanic origin, such as Salvadoran or Dominican.

As a result of the census information and following demographic trends, it should be is noted that the demography of the Latino population will increasingly be defined by the native-born (del Pinal & Singer, 1997). Adding to the observation that U.S.-born Latinos have changed the demography of the population and noting the effects of this new dimension on the labor force and schools are Suro and Passel (2003).

They indicated that,

> The effects of Hispanic population growth on the nation are shifting in important ways. Most simply, the largest impact over the past 30 years has been measured in the number of Spanish-speaking immigrants joining the labor force. However, in the current decade and for the foreseeable future there will be a very sizeable impact from the number of native-born Latinos entering the nation's schools and in the flow of English-speaking, U.S.-educated Hispanics entering the labor market. (Suro & Passel, 2003, p. 2)
>
> Between 2000 and 2020, the number of second-generation Latinos in U.S. schools will double and the number in the U.S. labor force will triple. Nearly one-fourth of labor force growth over the next 20 years will be from children of Latino immigrants. (Suro & Passel, 2003, p. 2)

The data collected during the last census also provided information about the country of origin identified by the majority of the Latinos in this country. In the U.S. today, Latinos of Mexican descent account for 66.9% of the total Latino population (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). Individuals from Central and South America constituted approximately 14 % of the Latino population, while Puerto Ricans and Cubans accounted for the third largest group of Latinos (Zurita, 2005). Naturally following, the distribution of the Latino population is also reflected in the composition of Latino student population (Zurita, 2005). In 2002, Latinos made up 17% of the K-12 student population as opposed to about 6% of the total student population in 1972 (American Federation of Teachers Policy Brief [AFT] Policy Brief, 2004) and are concentrated in metropolitan areas in Texas, California and Florida (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002).

More specifically,

> In 2000, 27.1 million or 78.8% of Hispanics lived in seven states with Hispanic populations of 1 million or more (California, Texas, New York, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey). Hispanics in California accounted for 11 million (31.1%) of the total Hispanic population, while the Hispanic population in Texas accounted for 6.7 (18.9%). (Guzman, 2001, p. 3)

As previously indicated, though the federal government, through its census taking efforts collected information about the origin or decent of individuals, they continued to define all Hispanics or Latinos as one group and, to this day, use the terms interchangeably (Guzman, 2001). The Latino population, however, is far from being a monolithic group (Zurita, 2005) and defies simple characterization. The Latino population consists of groups that are defined by their country of origin, immigration status—(voluntary or involuntary) and racial self-identification (Zurita, 2005). Further, an individual's social construction of their ethnic identity provides insight to the social realities the ethnic group understands (Flores-Niemann, Romero, Arredondo & Rodriguez, 1999) and therefore, may contribute to a better understanding of the Latino's (of Mexican-American decent) understanding of their role in the education of their children when compared to other ethnic groups. As such, when all Hispanics are considered as one group, it is difficult to fully understand the nuances of language and culture and ways in which to address the academic needs of students of a specific ethnic group. However, inasmuch as U.S-born second- and third-generation Latinos of Mexican descent are most represented in the school district of this study, this population is the focus.

Since Texas is the focus of this study, the recent studies by Texas demographer, Dr. Steve H. Murdock (2006), regarding the population growth trends in Texas, are also notable. Murdock (2006) signals that the population growth trends of Latinos may be more evident in Texas than in other states mostly because of the state's proximity to the Mexican border, but also because Texas has long been a destination state for immigrants. He predicted that the Latino population in Texas will substantially increase over the next 40 years with approximately 78% of the *new* Texans being of predominantly Mexican decent. The majority of the new Texans, however, will be children of those Latinos who have already made their home in Texas (Murdock, 2006).

Inasmuch as the number of Latinos now living in Texas has increased and the data indicate a significant number of Latinos are under the age of 18 (AFT, 2004), it follows that the number of U.S.-born Latino students enrolled in Texas schools, too, has increased. With the increased number of U.S.-born Latino children in Texas schools, the composition of the once white-dominated classrooms of the past decades in Texas has changed and merit attention.

Academic Achievement of Latino Students

Recent political rhetoric and public commentary, noting the decreasing academic performance of U.S. students when compared to their counterparts in foreign countries, have called for the reform of current educational practices in order to prepare students for an increasingly competitive society (Levin & Fullan, 2008). This call to reform the U.S. educational system and ensure educational excellence is evident in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB represents an unprecedented and comprehensive educational initiative aimed at narrowing long-standing achievement gaps between advantaged and less advantaged students, as it holds states and schools accountable to high standards for student achievement. More specifically, the NCLB preamble states that the purpose of the legislation is to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (NCLB, 2001).

As a result of the national NCLB policy, which is focused on closing the academic achievement gap between those advantaged and less advantaged students, the performance of non-white students on standardized tests stands in stark contrast to the performance of the white student population. Specifically, the current accountability system, because it reflects the performance of students in a number of subgroups, including students who are economically disadvantaged, from major racial and ethnic groups, with disabilities, who are limited English proficient, classified as migrant, and identified through their gender, there is a more obvious picture of the academic underperformance of Latino students (AFT, 2004). Further, as noted in an AFT 2004 Policy Brief, the academic performance of Latino students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remains disparate when compared to white students taking the same test. Specifically stated: "Only 11% of Latino eighth graders scored at or above proficient in math, compared to 36% of white eighth graders. In reading, only 14 % of Latino eighth graders scored at or above proficient, compared to 39% of white eighth graders" (p. 3).

Though, nationally, Latino students are fairing far better in current times as compared to the time prior to the current focus on performance of the accountability system's subgroup population, the test scores of non-white students continue to lag when compared to white students taking the same tests (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Labor (2000) reported that Latinos have the highest dropout rates of any major ethnic group in the United States. Contreras (2004) noted that Latino students are often subjected to "inequalities in schooling opportunities, processes and outcomes. Forced to attend inferior schools, living in deep poverty and in heavily segregated neighborhoods, many Latino students struggle, educationally, against the odds" (Contreras, 2004, p. 229). These are all contributing factors to the elevated dropout rate and poor academic performance of Latino students.

As noted, the literature (Llagas & Snyder, 2003) discussed the underperformance of Latino students and has often cited the Latino students' inability to speak English, their poverty, and inferior schooling as possible reasons for their disproportionate academic failure and tendency to drop out of school when compared to their white counterparts. Interestingly and perhaps because the literature seemed to discuss all Latino students as one group, regardless of country of origin and time in this country, there seemed to exist a void in understanding ways in which to address the academic failure of the U.S.-born Latino student, other than to suggest they acquire English language skills. Further, the literature (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Rodriguez-Brown, Li, & Albom, 1999; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valdes, 1996) seems focused on the immigrant Latino family, their struggles to reach a new country, and the difficulties they experience as they learn English and live in poverty. Again, the literature failed to distinguish the experiences of the U.S.-born Latino student whose family speaks English or is bilingual and has not experienced the same struggles as the recent immigrant family. In addition to a concentration on the experiences of immigrant families, there also seemed to be a lack of literature focused on the social construction of an ethnic identity and how the construction may impact the social realities of the ethnic group.

Though the central points of this literature review centered on the knowledge that marginalized students of color do not achieve academically as well or at the same rate as white students, it is necessary to more clearly understand the factors which contribute to the academic performance of U.S.-born Latino students. Specifically, the emphasized focus of this study is to understand the role the U.S.-born Latino parent plays in the schooling process of their children and bring voice to their experiences and perceptions.

Parent Involvement in the Schooling Process

Over the past 50 years, the discourse about the role of the school and the family as influential institutions in the development of children has been the cornerstone of parent involvement efforts. The discourse has also evolved from competing contexts in which the school works in isolation to affect the development of children to more collaborative contexts that encourage school personnel and families to work together to ensure the healthy and successful development of children (Epstein, 2001). As such, there is a greater understanding that all persons involved in the education of children are required to share responsibilities for the development of children and that both schools and families influence children simultaneously (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

The importance of the parents' engagement in the schooling process has also found itself in the development of public policy. In the early 1960s, public policy efforts through Head Start and other programs aimed at assisting low-income families to successfully transition their preschool children into the public school system brought an increased awareness of the importance of the parent-school connection (Connors & Epstein, 1995). In addition to the public policies geared to successfully transition low-income students into the public school system, other policies began to change the parent and school connection. Notable policies included the efforts to provide breakfast and lunch to poor students while the federal programs such as Title I in the 1970s marked the dawn of focused efforts to provide equity for low-income children and their families (Epstein, 2001).

In the early 1980s, the national discourse, stemming from the National Commission on Excellence in Education's published results, noted that schools in the United States were mediocre and failed to produce students capable of successfully participating at an international level. As a result of the brutally frank discussion about the inadequacies of the public school system and the contributing factors associated with the failure of the system, public policies focused on the importance of families and schools working as partners to address the emerging realization that the more complex family structures and changing community conditions were leading factors contributing to the failure of students (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Epstein, 1986). The new definition of parents and schools as partners was born mostly in response to the notion that all families "need better information about their children, the schools, and the part they play across the grades to influence children's well-being, learning, and development" so that they succeed (Epstein, 2001, p. 39). Specifically, "In the 1980s, studies began to clarify the amorphous term, *parent involvement* and recast the emphasis from parent involvement (left to the parent) to *school and family partnerships,* or, more fully, *school, family, and community partnerships,* recognizing the shared responsibilities for children within and across contexts" (p. 40).

The central principle of Epstein's (1987, 1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, suggests that schools, families, and communities have as one of their common areas of interest, the academic success of students as a common interest. As such, the goals to ensure the academic success of students is best achieved with a cooperative effort of action and support (Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Sanders, 2006).

This review of literature is not an attempt to fully describe every parent involvement structure or strategy designed by scholars and on which many school districts rely to form local parent involvement programs in their quest to raise the student's academic performance. Instead, this is a review focused on understanding the role of the U.S.-born Latino parent in the education of their children from the Latino parent's perspective. However, before an exploration regarding the U.S.-born Latino parent's role in the education of their children could occur there must exist a more clear understanding of the concept of parent involvement and the importance of the parent's involvement in the schooling process.

The following is a review of research focused primarily on gaining a better understanding of the importance of the parent's role in the education of their children. In addition, it is a review of the various ways in which parents participate, and why and how parents decide to participate in their role as partners in the education of their children.

The Comer Typology

Beginning almost three decades ago, James Comer, a Yale University professor, contributed extensively to understanding that children's growth and development are shaped extensively by their families and communities and by the relationships they have with teachers and administrators; "when children are developing well, they learn well" (Comer et al., 1996, p. 1). As such, Comer posited that "effective schooling cannot be a unidimensional enterprise" (Comer et al., 1996, p. xvii) and suggested that when all persons involved in the education of children act as a community and work through thoughtful processes, all children will learn well. In an effort to highlight the importance of the role of the parent as the child's first teacher and to encourage a strong bond between the parent, the child, and the school personnel so that the child grows in developmentally appropriate ways (Comer, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 2004), Comer developed School Development Program (SDP) schools. Comer's SDP schools implement a school reform initiative based on a process that, "unites, empowers, and inspires significant adult caretakers and caregivers, parents, and teachers to make an individual and collective difference in children's lives" (Comer et al., 1996, p. xviii). Specifically, Comer placed the parent and families at the center of change and created processes through which adults were purposefully asked to take the time to provide a healthful climate for the children in their lives.

Again, with parents and families at the center of school reform and change, Comer's SDP model schools presented a framework through which schools could "transform and improve their programs and, with adequate staffing and appropriate teaching and curricula, achieve high levels of student performance" (Comer et al., 1996, p. 9). The basic components of his framework consist of three teams, driven by three guiding principles and focused on three school operations. The SPD model "requires the school staff and the stakeholders to organize themselves into the three teams" (Comer et al. 1996, p. 9). The three teams also referred to as the *three mechanisms* of the SDP model school include a School Planning and Management Team (SPMT), a Student and Staff Support Team (SSST), and a Parent Team (PT) (see Figure 1).

The SPM Team "is the central organizing body in the school" whose purpose "is to develop and monitor a Comprehensive School Plan for the academic, social climate, and staff development goals" of all of the students and adults in the school (Comer et al., 1996, p. 11). The SSS Team addresses the school climate and psychosocial issues that may impact students and is most commonly comprised of child development and mental health professionals. The Parent Team (PT) is focused on involving parents at "all levels of school life, especially parents who have typically not been involved in their children's education due to feeling uncomfortable in the school environment" (Comer et al., 1996, p. 12).

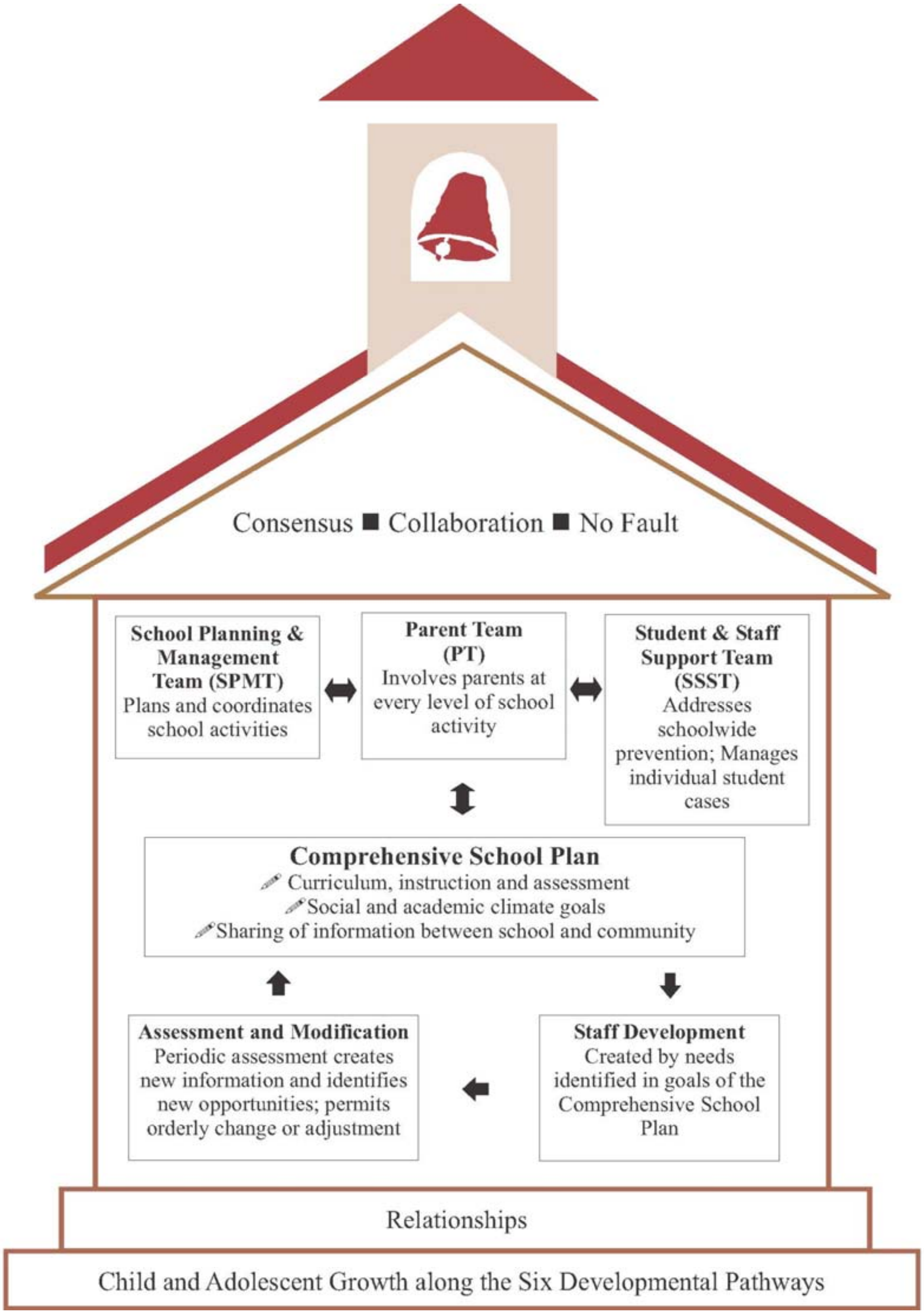

Consensus ■ Collaboration ■ No Fault
School Planning & Management Team (SPMT)
Plans and coordinates school activities
Parent Team (PT)
Involves parents at every level of school activity
Student & Staff Support Team (SSST)
Addresses schoolwide prevention; Manages individual student cases
Comprehensive School Plan
✎ Curriculum, instruction and assessment
✎ Social and academic climate goals
✎ Sharing of information between school and community
Assessment and Modification
Periodic assessment creates new information and identifies new opportunities; permits orderly change or adjustment
Staff Development
Created by needs identified in goals of the Comprehensive School Plan
Relationships
Child and Adolescent Growth along the Six Developmental Pathways

FIGURE 1. Model of SDP Process

As such, Comer et al. (1996) provided a three-tiered level system to delineate how parents involve themselves in the education of their children and suggested that purposeful efforts must be planned by school personnel to engage parents in any one of the three levels, which will, in turn, enhance students' learning. Specifically, Comer's level system described parents at Level 1 as participants who provided general support for school activities by attending parent teacher conferences and school events, monitoring homework, and assisting with fund-raising activities. At Level 2, the parents' support and engagement is described as volunteerism; parents as volunteers in daily school affairs. At Level 3 the parents participated in school decision making and governance activities by serving on teams and committees (Comer et al., 2004).

Also basic to Comer's SPD model are the three principles which guide the school's reform efforts. "In order to sustain a learning and caring community in which all adults feel respected and all children feel valued and motivated to learn and achieve," (Comer et al., 1996, p. 9), the teams operate under three guiding principles—consensus, collaboration, and no-fault. The consensus-building approach, set in a collaborative and no-fault/blaming environment, allows all of the participants to engage in making decisions and thus, encourages buy in and participation.

Finally, the three school operations, basic to Comer's model, include the development of a Comprehensive School Plan (CSP), a needs-based staff development plan, and a plan for specific monitoring and assessment. The Comprehensive School Plan "gives direction and specific focus to the school improvement process" (Comer et al., 1996, p. 13). Central to the CSP is the articulation of a staff development plan with activities based on the training needs of the staff. Lastly, the School Development Program (SDP) model's third key operation in the school improvement process is the assessment of the school program and the modification of strategies. In implementing this school improvement model, information becomes available to the school so that targeted strategies can be developed and implemented, thus ensuring the success of all students (Comer et al., 1996).

In summary, Comer and his colleagues posited that engaging parents in the schooling process is a critical component of school reform. He further suggested that the engagement of parents in the activities of the school through the SDP school framework will result in the successful reformation of schools and the ultimate academic success of all students.

Epstein Typology

Today, hardly an educational reform article can be read without reference to the importance of the role of the school in teaching a child and the role of the parent in preparing the child for school (Epstein, 1987). This premise was affirmed in the recognized work of Joyce Epstein regarding what she referred to as *typologies of parent involvement*.

In Epstein's (1987) initial work, she outlined a *typology* of parent involvement detailing "four important types of parent involvement in schools" (p. 121).

Specifically, the four types of parent involvement are: (a) Type 1—*Parenting,* which is the basic obligation of parents to provide for the needs of their children, such as food, clothing, shelter, health, and safety, and to understand the growth and development of their children; (b) Type 2—*Communicating,* which is the communication from the school to the home. Clearly stated, the school has an obligation to keep the parents informed of school activities and the parent's have a basic obligation to act on the expectations of the school; (c) Type 3—*Volunteering,* activities provide an avenue for parents to assist teachers, administrators, parent groups, and students at school; and (d) Type 4—*Learning at Home,* which encourages and assists parents with extending the learning activities of the classroom to the home.

Epstein (2001) expanded the original four types of parental involvement to include two additional types for a total of six types of involvement. Type 5—*Decision Making,* allows for parents to participate in the decision making process about the school programs and activities that affect their child and other children. Type 6—*Collaborating with the Community,* encourages the schools to build links between the schools, families and community groups for the mutual benefit of the students.

Additionally, Epstein (2001) presented a new theoretical frame or model in which she explains the concept of different overlapping family and school spheres of influence, which include both external and internal structures (Figures 2 and 3).

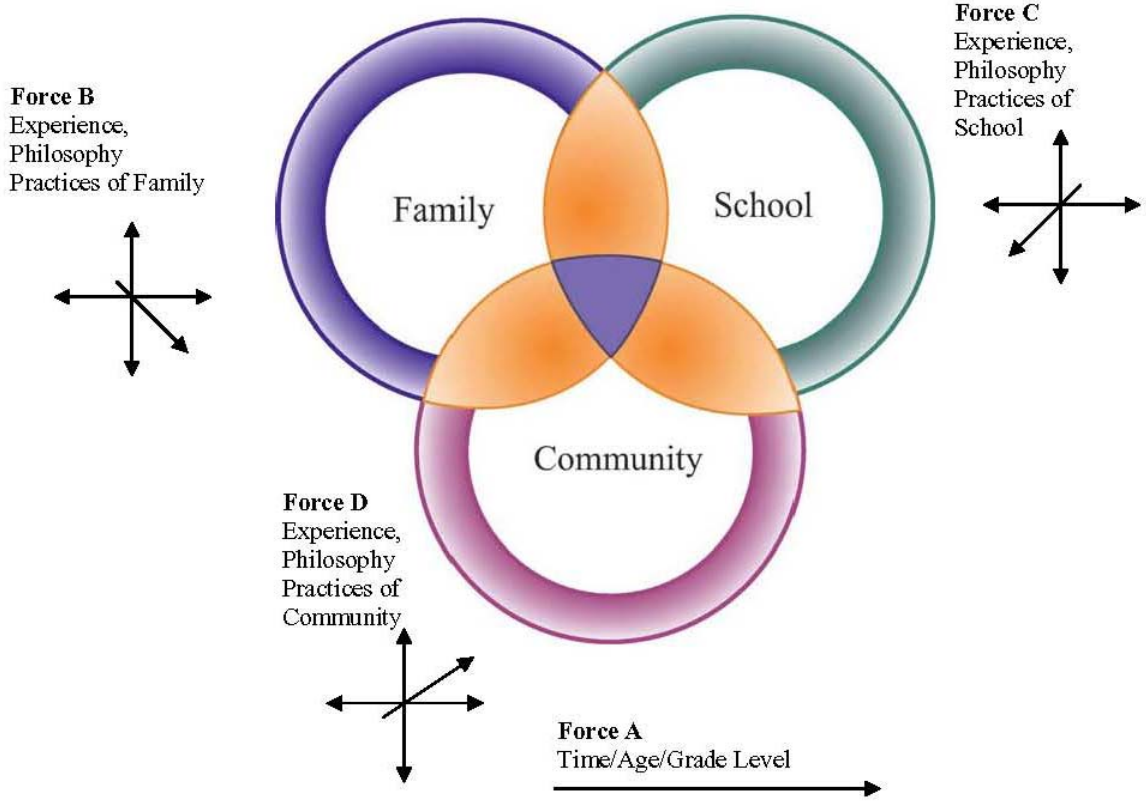
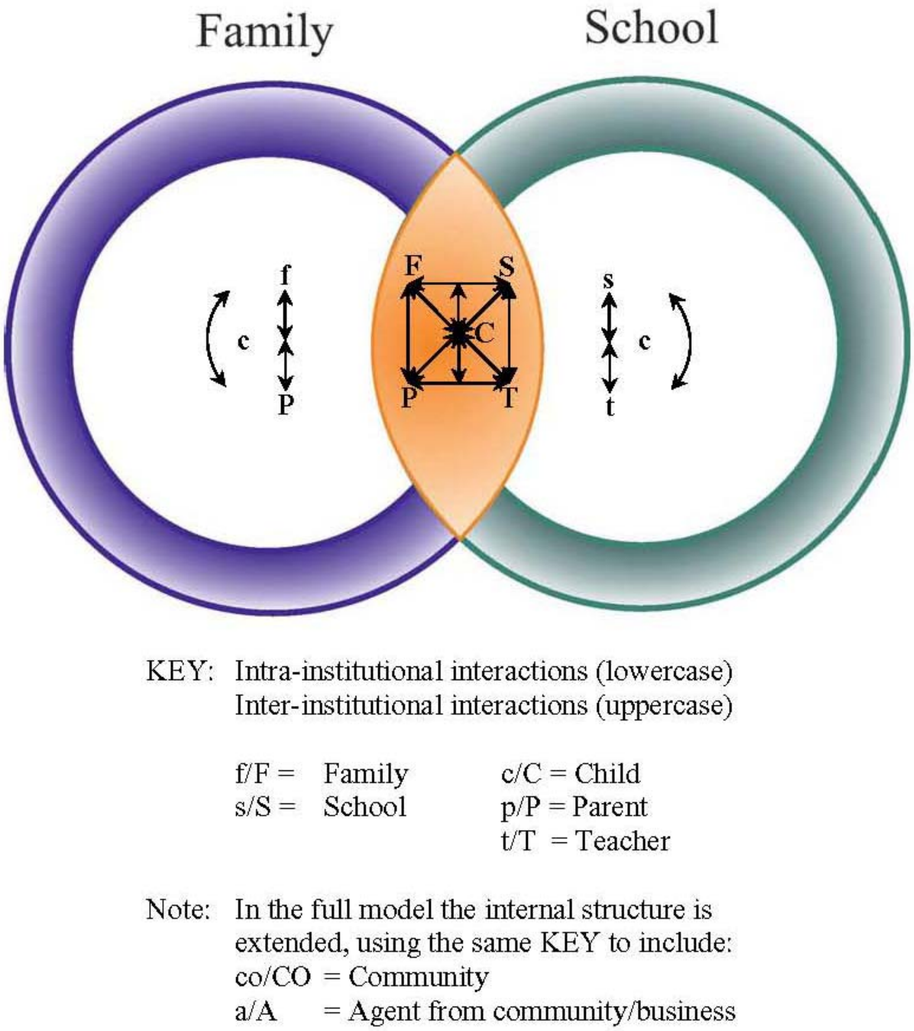

Force B
Experience,
Philosophy
Practices of Family
Family
School
Force C
Experience,
Philosophy
Practices of
School
Community
Force D
Experience,
Philosophy
Practices of
Community
Force A
Time/Age/Grade Level

FIGURE 2. Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning (External Structure of Theoretical Model)



KEY: Intra-institutional interactions (lowercase)
Inter-institutional interactions (uppercase)

f/F = Family
s/S = School
c/C = Child
p/P = Parent
t/T = Teacher

Note: In the full model the internal structure is extended, using the same KEY to include:
co/CO = Community
a/A = Agent from community/business

FIGURE 3. Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning (Internal Structure of Theoretical Model)

Epstein suggests that the ways in which the school personnel and the families interact with each other to either include or exclude each other are the spheres of influences that affect student learning and development. She further suggests that the model reflects “the fact that at any time, in any school, and in any family, parent involvement is a variable that can be increased or decreased by the practices of teachers, administrators, parents, and students” and as such, “parents, students, and teachers benefit most from practices that increase the overlap in school and family spheres of influence all along the [child’s] developmental time line (p. 35).

Specifically, in Epstein’s (2001) “external structure of the model, she explains that there are overlapping spheres or nonoverlapping spheres that represent the family, school, and community” (p. 27). In the external model, “the degree of overlap is controlled by three forces: time, experience in families, and experience in schools” (p. 27). As such, she explains that “Force A represents a developmental time and history line for students, families, and schools. Time refers to individual and historical time: the age and grade level of the child and the social conditions of the period during which the child is in school” (p. 27).

She further explains that:

> Force B and Force C represent the experiences of and pressures on family and school organizations and their members that need to be accounted for to study, understand, or change family-school relations. These forces push together or pull apart the spheres to produce more or less overlap of family and school actions, interactions, and influence all along the time line. (p. 29)

Lastly, she explains that:

> When parents maintain or increase interest and involvement in their children’s schooling (Force B), they create greater overlap of the family and school

> spheres than would be expected on the average. When teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice (Force C), they create greater overlap than would typically be expected. (Epstein, 2001, p. 29)

Epstein (2001) further explained that the social relationships in the external and internal models can be studied at two different levels; the institutional and the individual levels and further states that they are intimately related and often overlap. She adds, “the *maximum* overlap occurs when schools and families operate as true *partners,* with frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communication between parents and teachers in a comprehensive program [of parent involvement]” (p. 29). Specifically, “the model [of overlapping spheres of influence] recognizes the inter-locking histories of the institutions and the individuals in each, and the continuing, causal connections between organizations and individuals” (p. 31).

The research of both Comer (1984) and Epstein (1995) support the premise that parent involvement is critical to the academic achievement of students and as such, both investigated how parents are involved in the schooling process. As a result, each researcher designed a framework to explain the most effective ways in which to engage parents so that the academic achievement of students is improved. The seminal work of the two aforementioned researchers note the importance of connecting the institutions of school and family as partners so that children can develop and learn. Specifically, Comer provided a framework through his SDP schools; Epstein articulates six types of involvement and presents a theoretical framework describing the overlapping spheres as influence on children’s learning. The researchers’ presentations argued the importance of engaging parents and further suggested how and when to engage families. Their work provides a formidable foundation from which to build, however, there still exists a gap in understanding the perspectives of the Latino parent. The following is a review of the Latino parents' perspective of parent involvement.

Parent Involvement—Another View, a Latino Perspective

Although the aforementioned review is limited to the work of two researchers, there exists ample research discussing what parent involvement is [See Tinkler (2002) for a meta-analysis], why it is important and how the parents' participation in the schooling process affects the academic success of their children. However, most evident in the review of the literature is the seemingly limited literature regarding how Latino parents and more specifically, U.S.-born Latino parents construct their involvement in their children's education. Therefore, consideration of a new perspective—the Latino parents' understanding of their role in the education of their children is merited. Moreover, when the literature discusses the issue of parent involvement from the Latino parents' perspective, it focuses on the experiences and voices of Latino parents who are immigrants and centers on the immigrants' struggles with the educational system because of perceived barriers (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995). The most commonly identified perceived barriers included the Latino parents' inability to speak English, their lack of experience with the U.S. public school system, and cultural differences.

This perceived inability or unwillingness of parents to participate in parent involvement programs was dispelled by Delgado-Gaitán (1991) in her research described in the Carpenteria study. The Carpenteria study, detailed the experiences of a Mexican-American, predominantly immigrant, community's efforts to gain a voice in the schooling process of their children. Specifically, in the study, Delgado-Gaitán identified how parent involvement activities function in a school setting and the effectiveness of the activities. She described dimensions of power as central to the ways in which parents were involved with the school. First, she described the domination of power the school exercised over the parent as representative of the conventional types of involvement. She noted that those activities, which are designed and directed by the school personnel, are the attempts the school initiates to "make the family conform to the school" (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991, p. 40). The second dimension of power is represented in what Delgado-Gaitán referred to as non-conventional parent involvement activities. To Delgado-Gaitán, these activities, which involved training sessions or informational presentations about how the parents could help their children succeed, represented an attempt by the school at power sharing. Delgado-Gaitán (1991) noted that though the parent involvement activities were still controlled by the school, the fact that the school engaged parents in an exchange of information and ideas there was an attempt on the part of the school to share the power. The third dimension of Delgado-Gaitán's model of parent involvement is one in which parents were provided with the autonomy to "set their own agendas and design a context in which they invite the school personnel to share decision making about programs, policies and practices related to the education of their children" (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991, p. 40).

The engagement of Latino parents in non-traditional ways, as suggested by Delgado-Gaitán, recognized and honored the parents' "social and cultural experiences, allowing them to feel a part of their children's schooling, and thus achieving a better balance of power and cooperation between the home and the school" (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991, p. 43). Delgado-Gaitán (1991) further stated that the "new acculturation will benefit these families throughout the entire schooling process" (p. 44).

Adding to the notion that not everyone defines parent involvement in the same way are Scribner et al. (1999). In their study of parent involvement in a highly successful Latino school district, they found that teachers and parents had different understandings of the role of parents in the schooling process. Teachers, on one hand, defined parent involvement as participation in formal activities such as attendance at meetings, events or participation in classroom activities. Parents, on the other hand, defined their active participation in a more informal context. The parents in this study described ways in which they nurtured their children, instilled cultural and family values and supported their child's well-being as being active in their child's education. This alternate definition of parent involvement is also presented in the work of Lopez (1999).

In Lopez's study (1999) of immigrant and migrant families in Texas, a different definition of parent involvement is offered. Lopez concluded, as did Delgado-Gaitán, that traditional definitions of parent involvement excluded people of color, particularly migrant workers. In his attempt to locate alternate constructions of parental involvement activities, specifically in three migrant families in South Texas, Lopez found that the migrant families that he studied did not engage in the typically defined parent involvement activities. In fact, they provided a different dimension; parent involvement as the "transmission of a work ethic to their children, in an attempt to have their children appreciate the value of school" (Lopez, 1999, p. 199). While Scribner et al. (1999) found stark differences in the perceptions of teachers and parents about what constituted parent involvement, Lopez (1999) uncovered a completely undiscovered dimension when he engaged in conversation with Latino migrant parents.

Lopez (1999) found that the long-suffering hours and life of a migrant worker compelled the parents of these families to instill in their children the necessity for staying in school and doing their best in order to garner better jobs and wages and be free from the life they knew as migrant workers. By instilling the value of hard work and staying in school, the parents in Lopez's study believed that they were actively engaged in the education of their children. However, from the teachers' perspectives, the ways in which the parents should be involved in the education of their children were quite different. In Lopez's study, the teachers most often described parent involvement as those occasions when parents are engaged in formal activities prescribed by the school, such as parent conferences and Parent Teacher Association meetings.

The different perspectives about what constitutes parent involvement may not only be different from what parents and teachers know, but it also suggests that engagement by Latino parents in the schooling process may be different than that of non-Latino parents. Both Epstein (2001) and Lopez (2001) suggest that school personnel define parent involvement as the occasions on which the parents attend school events such as a PTA meeting or a parent conference; formal activities, reflecting involved and *good* parents. In addition, such encounters with parents are often conducted in a school setting, in English, and with a parent who has had personal experience with the U.S. school system.

This concept of parental involvement is quite different from many Latino parents' perspectives. Often in the Latino culture, for example, teachers are held in high regard (Chavkin, 1989; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995) and any discussion about the child's academic performance or type of questioning about grades or assignments may be considered a highly disrespectful act (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Trumball et al., 2001). As discussed previously, some Latino parents see their role in the education of their child quite differently than the role of the school (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Lopez, 2001; Scribner et al., 1999). The role of the parents is to ensure the total well-being of the child (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992), while the school's role is to impart knowledge (Chavkin, 1991; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992).

The School and Home Relationship—A Cycle of Misunderstanding

Some Latino parents and school personnel seem to have different definitions of parental involvement and as a result, parents and school personnel have a basic misunderstanding about the parents' role in the education of their children. This basic misunderstanding about how a parent should or should not be involved in the schooling process may be at the root of the negative perceptions held by some school personnel about Latino parents when they do not participate in the privileged activities of the school. As a result of their non-participation in the activities prescribed by the school, some school personnel assume that Latino parents are uncaring about the schooling of their children and lack parenting skills (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Peña, 2000). The expectations of the school personnel and the actions of the parents, because they are not fully understood by either party, contribute to a series of misunderstandings. This cycle of misunderstandings seems to lead school personnel to hold negative perceptions about Latino parents—a deficit thinking about Latino parents. It also seems to lead to the parents' sense of un-belonging in the school (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Valencia & Black, 2002).

This variance in the perceptions of what constitutes parent involvement, by both teachers and parents, is a significant barrier for Latino families, but it is not the only constraint faced by the Latino parent. In addition to the misunderstanding about how to be involved in the education of their children, many Latino parents are also faced with other constraints that they must maneuver on a daily basis. These constraints, which can be categorized into several general themes, may explain why some parents are seemingly absent from the school campus. Specifically, the differences in the school personnel's (1) parents' primary language, (2) culture, (3) level of education, (4) inexperience with the U.S. school system and (5) any previous negative encounters between the two groups account for some key reasons why some Latino parents do not have a more visible presence on the campus (Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992, 2001; Lopez, 2001; Moles, 1993; Peña, 2000; Scribner et al., 1999; Shannon, 1996). Further, the differences between the Latino culture and the dominant white culture often present walls through which doors remain illusive and result in an everyday struggle for the Latino parent who must negotiate the school system in order to assist his or her child (Garcia & Guerra, 2004).

In order to afford educators a better understanding of challenges some Latino families face, information about the cultural context in which Latino families operate is necessary (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). For example, many Latino parents raise their children within the cultural frame of *educación.* Though the term translates from the Spanish as education, the context or meaning is different. Within the Latino cultural context, this type of education refers to the raising of a moral and responsible child (Reese, Gallimore, Balzano & Goldenberg, 1995). The concept is different from the understanding of the dominant society's white cultural view of education, which is the academic performance in a school setting (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). The difference in understanding the concept of educating a child does not suggest that one definition is right or wrong. It simply suggests that it is different and should begin to explain that Latino parents value the instruction they receive in school and want their children to succeed.

In addition to understanding the Latino cultural construction of how they understand the term *education,* is also to understand the difference in how families and children work together within the Latino home. Trumbull et al. (2001) described how Latino families work together as a family unit and how they value this approach in their daily lives. The concept of togetherness and working in the interest of the group can be described as *collectivism* (Trumball et al., 2001). Specifically, in the context of the Latino home culture, *collectivism* refers to the interdependent relationships one member of the family has with the others and is centered in the well-being of the group rather than in the individualistic and competitive nature, most often a characteristic, of American society (Trumball et al., 2001). The collective manner in which some Latino families operate seems to be contrary to the current structure of the public school system. The public school system seems to emphasize individual competitiveness and accomplishment. This different way of approaching everyday life and interpersonal interactions seems to cause some Latino children, and subsequently, their parents, to deliberately and constantly think about how they must work with the school. It seems that this misunderstanding has created a cultural chasm between the school and many Latino families.

Solórzano and Yosso (2000) further suggest that the cultural divide is magnified when schools who serve Latino children lack Latino teachers who can establish rapport with the families. This, again, makes it necessary for some Latino parents to navigate the school culture void of any familiar framework. The tensions and frustrations stemming from the unfamiliarity with the school system are further exacerbated when non-English speaking parents do not have anyone who can help them understand what the school expects of them and, in turn, explain to school personnel what they need from the school. In a situation where parents and school personnel cannot communicate, parents often find themselves relinquishing their role as parent because their child must translate for them. As such, parents feel inadequate and devalued (Aspiazu, Baurer, & Spillett, 1998). Other situations also contributing to some Latino parents' sense of inadequacy are those occasions when teachers expect parents to be their extension at home by asking the parents to help with projects and assignments for which the parent may not be prepared to assist (Aspiazu et al., 1998; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Scribner et al., 1999; Shannon, 1996). The misunderstanding of the Latino culture by school personnel has seemingly contributed to the school personnel's notion that some Latino parents do not care about the education of their children—a deficit thinking model about Latino parents.

In reviewing the literature, with a critical lens, I found that there exists an overwhelming perception that the seeming lack of parent involvement by Latino parents stems from the school personnel's belief that Latino parents have a non-caring stance toward the value of education. The perception that Latino parents do not care about the education of their children is articulated in the work of Valencia and Black (2002). In their research, they traced the lingering myth "that Mexican-Americans, particularly, parents of low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, do not value education. As a consequence, the myth asserts, Mexican-American children experience poor academic achievement" (p. 81).

In an attempt to further debunk the notion that Latino parents do not value education, Latino scholars have investigated the concept of deficit thinking (Trueba, 2002; Trueba & Bartolome, 1997; Valencia, 2005). This concept can be traced over the centuries and is grounded in the theory that non-whites are genetically inferior to whites and accounts for much of the discourse surrounding the rationale for oppression (Valencia, 2005; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

As a result of this philosophy about non-whites, Latino scholars and others, contend that over the last century, Latino students have been subjected to deficit thinking by their white teachers (Alva & Padilla, 1995; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Trueba & Bartolome, 1997; Valencia, 2005; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Specifically, Latino students have been "described as *mentally retarded, linguistically handicapped, culturally and linguistically deprived semi-lingual,* and more euphemistically, *at-risk* and in need of fixing" (Flores, 1982, 1983 as cited in Trueba & Bartolome, 1997, p. 2). Also known in the literature as *social pathology* model (Shields, 2004; Trueba & Bartolome, 1997), the deficit model characterizes the academic problems of marginalized students to pathologies or deficits in their sociocultural background (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Moreover,

> Deficit thinking, an endogenous theory of school failure, *blames the victim*. It fails to examine how schools and the political economy are structured to prevent students from learning optimally. As such, the theory asserts that the poor schooling performance of students of color is rooted in the students'

> (alleged) cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held blameless. (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997, as cited in Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83)

Adding to the discourse regarding the deficit thinking about students of color is the research of Skrla and Scheurich (2001). The authors explained that the deficit thinking practices of school personnel and school structures lie at the core of why students of color consistently fail academically. Their studies indicated that though most schools exclaim that *all children can learn,* deficit views about children of color and poverty are embedded in the practices of the schools and in the actions of the school personnel, thus, leading to a deficit approach in working with these students; resulting in their poor academic performance. To further illustrate this concept, Skrla and Scheurich described Valencia's (1997) "description-explanation-prediction-prescription" cycle (p. 7). They stated,

> In other words, first, educators *describe* deficits, deficiencies, limitations, and shortcomings in children of color and children from low-income homes; next, educators *explain* these deficits by locating them in such factors as limited intelligence or dysfunctional families; then, educators *predict* the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits; and finally, educators *prescribe* educational interventions designed to remediate the deficits. This cycle has become self-perpetuating as the system in place in traditional U. S. schools, by design, produces failure for some students, (see McDermott, 1997, for example), particularly students of color and students from low-income homes, and then uses the failure as evidence that the "problem" lies with/in the children, their families, their neighborhood, their genetics, their social capital, and so forth rather than with the educational system and its deficit assumptions. (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, pp. 236-237)

The deficit thinking approach can also be extended to the way in which school personnel and structures respond to the engagement of parents of color or from low-income homes. Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) further added that the conventional understanding of parent involvement by schools and teachers has relied mostly on the deficit model, especially in high-poverty urban communities.

Lending to the argument that Latino families continue to be forced to deal with issues of deficit thinking, particularly in the school setting, is the work of Loretta Salas (2004). Salas (2004) examined how Mexican-American parents understood the special education services of a public school system. As documented in narratives, she engaged 10 Mexican-American mothers in conversation about their perceptions during the educational processing of their children into special education classes. Salas noted that the themes that resulted from the study revealed that the women wanted to assist in the decision making process but their voices were silenced by either overt or covert messages that let them know that their voices were not valued by the very institution—the school—whose mission was to educate all students (Salas, 2004). She further added that the parent involvement practices of schools must shift in the way that families who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) are engaged.

Current practices, as she stated [within special education],

> Ignore the notion that voice and being heard is a fundamental human right, if not one that is grounded in the very principles of which this nation stands for specifically the ideal of democracy, which ensures that all parents regardless of ethnicity, language, or gender have the right to act on behalf of their children's education. (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999, as cited in Salas, 2004, p. 190).

In another study involving the experiences of Latino parents' with a public school system, Shannon (1996) examined the personal experiences of a Mexican mother in relation to the education of her first grade child in a Colorado school. At first, the author illustrated how the mother sees herself in a proactive manner while advocating for her child in a particular situation. The author then juxtaposed the mother's explanation of the incident with the teacher's interpretation. The results revealed what the author called "a paradox about minority parental involvement: when a Mexican immigrant mother becomes involved at school in ways traditionally associated with majority parents, at best she is likely to be dismissed" (Shannon, 1996, p. 71). The study articulated "what happens when minority (low status) parents begin to behave as high-status parents" (p. 71). What the researcher found was that the voices of the working-class parents were not tolerated, they were dismissed and silenced. In essence the school and school system exercised its dominant and hegemonic status. The paradox, as Shannon (1996) stated, existed in that teachers view the lack of engagement by minority parents in traditional activities negatively, yet when the minority parents tried to engage and began to behave as high-status parents, the teachers, also reacted negatively. The parent in Shannon's study, though she tried to engage with the school in a way prescribed by the school, was dismissed and treated negatively when she presumably tried to become the teachers' parent in education with her child, thus rendering the parent perplexed about her role in the education of her child.

The apparent general deficit thinking about Latino parents and students by school personnel throughout school systems in this country may be factors contributing to the underperformance of Latino students. It seems that the deficit thinking about

Latino parents is based on the premise that Latino families lack language skills, have different cultural experiences, and lack experience with the American educational system, therefore, they are deficient as parents. As discussed earlier, the literature seems void of the perspectives of the U.S.-born Latino family who do not have the aforementioned barriers. This may be, perhaps, because the struggles of recent immigrants are so blinding that the assets of the Latino family and, more pointedly, the U.S.-born Latino family are unacknowledged.

As a result of the literature documenting the deficit thinking about Latinos held by school personnel, Moll (1992) contended that a shift in this negative thinking and the ways in which we engage Latino families are paramount if we are to ensure effective schooling of Latino children. Again, though there is much research that recognized the significant positive influence of parental involvement in the education of children on their attainment of academic success, there seems to be little movement to prepare educators to understand Latino parents and make productive connections with their students' families. Further, Moll (1992) suggested that it is necessary to promote critical reflective conversations about race and concentrate on the assets that the Latino family brings to the school house.

A New View—A Shift in Practice to Engage

Luis Moll (1992) contended that the classroom practices experienced by Latino youth tend to underestimate and constrain their academic performance. Gonzalez et al. (1995) noted "that educational institutions have stripped away the view of working-class minority students as emerging from households rich in social and intellectual resources" (p. 90). The authors added:

> Rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools. This emphasis on *disadvantages* has provided justification for lowered expectations in school and inaccurate portrayals of the children and their families. (p. 90)

As such, Moll's work called upon school personnel to delve into the everyday lives of their students to better understand the *hidden* home and community resources of their students. In doing so, Moll contended, teachers were better equipped to design different and effective ways to engage students and families; resulting in increased academic success.

Moll's (1992) originally-designed research tool, combining approaches from anthropology, psychology, and linguistics, as well as education, effectively studied the origin, use, and distribution of the knowledge and skills within a community. His findings indicated that though the Latino families he studied had a wealth of knowledge, unfortunately, however, he also found that the school personnel involved in the study were not aware of the parents' knowledge and, subsequently, did not use the assets of the family to teach academic skills. In addition to the parents' bank of knowledge, Moll (1992) found that the families shared what they knew through *social networks of exchange*. The families' shared experiences unveiled an expansive knowledge about fields ranging from agriculture, economics, household management, science, medicine, and religion and strengthened the individual Latino family and collective Latino community.

Moll’s (1992) research, which situated the learning of Latino children within a context of community and their culture, noted that such contexts influenced the Latino student’s academic performance. The revelation that households of Latino families had a wealth of knowledge, experiences, and skills has become known as *funds of knowledge* and subsequently is the theoretical framework for this study. An understanding of the wealth of information found in Latino households and an understanding of how it is accessed may begin to debunk the idea that the Latino children’s experiences are not noteworthy. Further, once school personnel can recognize and value the assets of the Latino family, they can design more effective strategies and activities to teach Latino children and to engage families in the schooling process (Moll, 1992; Noguera, 2004).

Although speaking about all children of color, adding to the conversation about the importance of understanding the home and culture is researcher, Gloria Ladson-Billings. Ladson-Billings (1995) capitalized on the work of anthropologists and continued the examination of “ways that teaching can better match the home and community cultures of students of color” (p. 466) and suggested that teaching should be culturally relevant. Specifically, Ladson-Billings suggested that parents have intimate knowledge of their children, and as such, may be unknown to teachers. It is, however, through a teacher’s understanding of the culture of the home that effective pedagogical strategies to maximize the potential for academic success can be developed. In developing culturally relevant teaching, Ladson-Billings suggested that it “must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 483). In essence, Ladson-Billings advocated for a re-education of pre-service teacher candidates and all current practitioners so they are better prepared to understand the culture of students so their academic needs are met (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Much like Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005), in their advocacy of knowing and understanding the assets of the family, Ladson-Billings, too, notes that the homes and culture of children of color have much to offer in understanding how best to provide academically relevant instruction—thus, ensuring the success of children of color.

However, before Latino parents can become involved in what the school personnel describe as authentic partners, I suggest that there must first be an understanding of what it means to be an authentic partner and what constitutes parent involvement. The aforementioned researchers have noted that in order for Latino students and other students of color to have greater success in school, the school personnel must understand the culture of the students and more closely align itself with the home so that Latino parents can become authentic partners in the schooling of their children. The lack of a common definition may be at the core of a misunderstanding currently held by many school personnel. There seems to be an assumption made by some school personnel that because some Latino parents do not participate in activities privileged by the schools that they do not care about their children's schooling. Further adding to the cycle of misunderstanding is the lack of awareness about the assets that a Latino family brings to school; many school personnel think of Latino families as having deficits that require fixing before their children can succeed. Lastly, constraints imposed by the school system, which many Latino families face on a daily basis when they maneuver the public school system, may be other aggravating factors that add to the misunderstanding of the system's intention to engage parents. It seems that when some Latino parents do get involved in the privileged activities of the school, some school personnel act as if they do not want them there. This paradox—the invitation of school personnel to participate, yet the insistence on conformity to the ways prescribed by the school—yields a grand misunderstanding between the Latino parent and the school personnel and the expectations one has of the other. In order to strengthen the school-parent compact and ensure the academic success of Latino students, the view of Latino parents by some school personnel and the ways in which they are engaged in the schooling process warrant a shift in thinking and merit further review.

Conclusion

In summary, the discourse of parental involvement by the researchers cited in this review of literature provides an understanding of the importance of parental involvement in the academic success of children. Most evident, however, in the review is the incongruence in the definition of parental involvement that currently exists and deficit thinking about Latinos by school personnel. The incongruence in understanding the role of the parent in the schooling process and a valuing of the Latino parents' role may stem from a failure to consider the perspective of the Latino family through their voices.

The next chapter is a discussion of the methodology for this study. Through a qualitative design, involving a snowball technique to identify the selected participants and conducted through in-depth individual interviews, this study addressed the perceptions of U.S.-born Latino parents in their role in the education of their children.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The third chapter of this qualitative study articulates the process and methods used to examine and more fully understand the perceptions and experiences of second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district in relation to their role and involvement in the schooling process of their children. Specifically, this interpretive study explored the meaning that the selected parents attached to their personal experiences as they engaged with school personnel in the education of their children.

Research Questions

In this study, because of my special interest in the parent-school relationship, I tried to understand the perceptions and experiences of Latino parents regarding academic success qualities, the expectations Latino parents have of the school, and their perceptions of their role in participating in school and parent activities that were organized around three research questions: (1) What do the selected parents perceive as parent involvement? (2) What expectations do the parents have of the school and, conversely, what expectations does the school have of them? (3) What perceptions do the parents hold about their role in participating in school-parent activities?

Two theoretical frameworks guided this study; funds of knowledge and deficit model of thinking. In looking at the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), I reviewed the assets of second- and third-generation Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district. From a deficit model of thinking (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997), I attempt to call into question the endogenous theory of blaming the victim or family for any perceived lack of parental involvement. I also reviewed how the school structures and district operations for involving parents may be the very structures that impede the active participation of Latino parents in the education of their children. This study, through a critical lens, gives voice to the perspectives of second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in discussing their understandings of academic success qualities, expectations of the school, and their perceptions of their role in the schooling process.

Research Context

The selected school system is located in the heart of an urban city on the northern edge of the South Texas valley and the southeastern most section of the Texas Hill Country. Ranked as one of the 10 largest cities in the country, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, the city has a population of approximately 1.4 million (Chapa & de la Rosa, 2004). The current racial composition of the city indicates that 58% of the citizens are of Hispanic (or Latino) origin, 32% non-Hispanic (Caucasian), 7% African American, 2% Asian, and 1% Native American. The median age of the citizenry is 32 years and there are an approximately equal number of males and females currently living in the city. The median income for a household is $36,214, and the median income for a family is $41,331. The per capita income of the city is $17,487. Seventeen percent of the population and 14% of families are below the poverty line (Jones, 2008; Wikipedia, 2006).

The city's older Spanish Colonial architectural structures stand in stark contrast to the scenic skyline of steel and concrete buildings. The sounds of the urban traffic belie the hospitality and graciousness that characterize the inhabitants. The numerous tourist attractions entice some twenty million tourists to visit the city annually and contribute substantially to its economy. The city boasts an innovative medical research center and related facilities, which account for a $12 billion biomedical industry. Fifteen independent and separate school districts serve the city and county area, serving more than 200,000 students in the three largest school districts. Accredited by the state of Texas, each district offers a comprehensive school curriculum.

Of the 14 parents invited to participate in the study, all reside in the city's school district, Amistad ISD[3], which serves the downtown and inner city areas and has a student population of approximately 54,000 students. First established as a school district in 1899, the school district has the third largest population of the 15 school districts that are entirely or primarily within the county. It is the tenth largest of Texas' 1057 school districts. Living in a school district as diverse and historically rich as this urban center, residents enjoy a number of activities that meld the old world treasures of the many historic sites and the new upbeat entertainment of franchised theme parks (Bremer, 2004).

Though the identified school district is located in the center of a thriving city, it has the largest percentage of economically disadvantaged students of the eight largest urban school districts in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2004). An average mobility rate of 32% places this school district among the highest among all urban centers regarding the number of the students who move from school to school within one academic year (Texas Education Agency, 2004). However, the school district improved from 2000 through 2004, which is the last data available (Texas Education Agency, 2004).

Access to the Setting

The experiences of my professional career, 31 years in the selected school district, have provided a significant opportunity for me to engage a number of Latino families in conversations about their children's education. As a teacher, I actively sought out parents to serve as co-teachers and volunteers in the classroom and authentic partners in the education of their children. Through observation and practical experience, I learned early in my career the positive effects on student learning resulting from a rich relationship between teacher and parent. After a number of years in service as a teacher, I began an administrative career and over my seven-year experience as an assistant principal and principal in the same school district and at a campus serving one of the most impoverished areas in the city, many relationships with parents were forged.

After my campus-level administrative experience, I was assigned to create a school-family-community department for the district. The purpose of the department was to identify and implement strategies to engage the school community in meaningful ways to ensure the academic success of students. Over the course of five years, we struggled to garner the support from district personnel at all levels. It seemed that school administrators and other school personnel could not understand the positive effects that a strong relationship with families and students would bring to the academic achievement of the students. Though we realized many positive outcomes, some five years later, there was a shift in the philosophy of how to actively engage parents and the department's fiscal and human resources were refocused.

My continued involvement in parent activities and the alliances I had with many parents throughout the school district, however, afforded me the opportunity to engage parents in deep conversations about their perceptions and experiences regarding their involvement in their children's education. In reflection, I have always had a sense or suspicion that district staff and administrative colleagues dismissed, devalued and, more often than not, ignored completely the contributions of parents. And perhaps it was the deep conversations I had with parents that first prompted me to interrogate the seeming marginalization of the Latino population we served. Also adding to my suspicion that many school personnel marginalized the Latino families of the school district was my perception that teachers and administrators seem to lay an overwhelming blame on the families of their students for deficits they perceive that the families possess and grant themselves absolution for any failings they may have in their teaching.

As I thought about the parents whose stories I wanted to tell, I focused on the parents who are rarely discussed in the literature—the non-immigrant, second- and third-generation, English-speaking Latinos who attended and experienced the American school system themselves and whose children were excelling in school. My interest lay with these Latino families because, too often, the literature seems focused on the immigrant family and their struggles, leaving the stories of the U.S.-born Latino families who constitute the majority of the Latino parents in the urban school district in which this study was conducted, untold. As such, the view about what constitutes parent involvement and how schools and communities operate to ensure the academic success of Latino students is bounded by the perceptions of a limited few—school personnel and immigrant families.

Also, contributing to my decision to focus on the stories of second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino families was an attempt to understand the perceptions and experiences of parents who were not impeded by the barriers often attributed to immigrant families. These include failing to speak English, feeling intimidated when they are faced with the unfamiliar American educational system, having cultural differences, and even possessing a sense of inadequacy to assist with their children's academic program. These reasons seemed irrelevant as I tried to understand the perceived lack of parental involvement in this urban high-poverty school district.

As such, I targeted parents who were second or third generation U.S.-born, identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino of Mexican-American decent, attended a U.S. public school, spoke English, and had children who had been engaged in the school system for at least five years and were excelling academically. I also asked the school personnel to identify parents who had demonstrated limited participation in the school setting and who they might consider as *uninvolved* in parent involvement activities.

The Research Participants

Through purposeful sampling which is designed to focus on "selecting *information-rich cases* for study in-depth" (Patton, 2002, p. 230), seven Latino parents whose children attend a public school in this high-poverty urban school system were invited to participate in this study. Though I know many parents who would richly contribute to this study, I employed the chain sampling method to select parents by expert informants in the school district (Patton, 2002).

The chain sampling process allowed others to recommend parent participants rather than imposing upon existing relationships that I might have with a parent. Specifically, I was interested in identifying parents from two particular high school feeder patterns within the school district. These clusters of schools have a significant number of Latino students, whose parents are second- or third-generation U.S.-born, and who speak English as their primary language. Again, in order to identify parents with whom I did not have a relationship, I asked each of the three elementary school principals for their recommendations of the names of four parents they would suggest as participants in this study. I posed only one question to each of the informants: "If I needed to speak with an English-speaking Latino parent whom you might consider to be an uninvolved parent, but whose child is doing very well in school, who would you recommend?" It should be noted that though I did not define an *uninvolved* parent, the school personnel's definition of a parent who was *uninvolved* was consistent with traditional definitions of parental involvement. Specifically, they defined the *uninvolved* parents as the opposite of the *involved and good parents*—the ones who attend functions and are in service to the school (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Of the 14 invited parents, seven were selected. These seven parents were identified as Latino, those who had children who are academically successful, and who had children who had been in school in the school district for at least five years.

The gender, age, and marital status of the parents were not considered in their selection.

To more fully understand the context and meaning of the participants' stories, I provide a brief description of each parent. All of the parents who participated met a general description as a second- or third-generation U.S.-born Latino, whose primary language is English, whose children have been involved in the identified school system for at least five years and were academically successful, and who the school considered to be uninvolved in the schooling process. Each was assured that their stories, experiences, and insights would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used to guarantee such. Moreover, I explained that their stories were necessary to more fully understand the parent-school relationship to enhance the academic achievement of Latino students. What follows is a description of the research participants. I used pseudonyms for each of the parents and the children who are the focus of this study, though I described all of the children who comprise the family unit. It should also be noted that, of the seven participants, four of the persons represent two married couples.

Pseudonym A, Jennifer Ramirez

Jennifer Ramirez is a thirty-something-year-old Latina, who was born and raised in the city though she attended and graduated high school from a neighboring school district within the metropolitan area. While a high school senior, she had her first child and married soon thereafter. She explained that her duties as a wife and mother thwarted her efforts to complete a higher degree, though she is a licensed vocational nurse. Her leadership skills were evident in high school as she served as a class officer and considered herself as popular. She is the mother of two boys, one in middle school and one in the primary grades, one 10-year-old girl (Allison), and three-year-old twin girls. She is a stay-at-home mother who cares for her young pre-school daughters and invalid mother during the day. She aspires to continue her studies as a nurse.

Pseudonym B, Isaac Ramirez

Isaac Ramirez was born and raised in a small town near the city to a devoutly religious, close-knit and conservative family, as he described. He completed high school in a rural town and moved to the city soon after graduation where he met and married Jennifer. He is currently employed as a mechanic and states that he works long hours to provide for his family.

Pseudonym C, Ida Santos

Ida Santos is in her early 30s, a high school graduate, is married to an active duty military enlistee currently serving in Iraq, and has two elementary-school-aged boys, Eddie and Frank. She has lived in the city all of her life—in or near the same neighborhood—and now finds herself living with her in-laws while her husband is deployed. She offered that she and her husband were struggling financially, so he decided to enlist in the army to get the sign-up bonus, a decision that has caused significant strain on her family. Mrs. Santos is also a singer who is trying to launch her career, performing with a punk band during the weekends.

Pseudonym D, Sophia Vazquez

Sophia Vazquez is a 35-year old Latina single parent of a 10-year old son, Jimmy. She works as a secretary in an office of medical researchers in the city's medical center. She has lived in the southern sector of the city all of her life and graduated high school from a neighboring school district. She has continued her education, though she has not been able to complete her degree. She is divorced and dealing with issues of the shared child rearing of her son. She rents a small home near her mother and sister who serve as her support system. Until recently, her child's father had been living in another city. He has returned to the city, is remarried and is active in their son's life.

Pseudonym E, Olga Huizar

Olga Huizar is a 33- year old Latina mother of two sons who attended school in the selected urban school district but did not graduate from high school. She left school two months before graduation in pursuit of a better home life. She works in the evenings at a local sports and special events arena. She is engaged to a man with whom she has been involved in a five-year relationship and someone whom she describes as a good role model for her sons and who is active in their lives.

Pseudonym F, Conrad Hernandez

Conrad Hernandez was born, raised and attended school in a large town in the southern part of the state. He graduated from high school and attended college in the same southern town. He moved to the metropolitan area, met, and married his wife of approximately five years, Lucia. Today, they share a home with Lucia's parents, their pre-kindergarten-aged daughter and Amy, Lucia's daughter from a previous relationship. Conrad works the evening shift as a custodian in one of the selected school district's administrative offices.

Pseudonym G, Lucia Hernandez

Lucia Hernandez was born and raised in the metropolitan area of this study and graduated from a high school within the same school system. She has lived in several places throughout her life, but never more than five miles from the home she grew up as a child. She works as a substitute teacher in the school system and wants to pursue a full-time job. She has two daughters, a fifth-grader (Amy) and a pre-kindergartener.

Description of the Research Design Methods

The qualitative methodology of this study is chosen because the aforementioned research questions required elaborate detail and depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002) to interpret the meaning of the conversations with the identified participants, observations conducted in the participants' environment, and a review of pertinent documents. Researchers employing such a methodology of naturalistic inquiry are committed to “studying human action in some setting that is not contrived, manipulated, or artificially fashioned by the inquirer; hence, the setting is said to be ‘natural’ or naturally occurring” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 174). The qualitative design, through a “thick description” (Geertz, 1983), allowed me to present detailed accounts of how the parents constructed meaning about their role in the parent-school relationship. In Schwandt (2001), “to *thickly describe* social action is actually to begin to interpret it, recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations and so on that characterize a particular episode” (p. 255). Further, “It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick” (p. 255). Through thick descriptions (Geertz, 1983) of the perceptions and experiences of the participants in their natural setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994), I was able to identify and obtain the heart of the data and provide an in-depth detailing of their accounts.

A relatively small sample of parents was *purposefully* selected to allow the researcher to conduct in-depth inquiry and understanding (Patton, 2002) of the parent-school relationship. As Schwandt (2001) explained, “There are two general strategies or logics for selecting units (organizations, events, people, documents, locations) to study in qualitative work: an empirical or statistical strategy and a theoretical or purposive strategy” (p. 232). Through a purposive strategy (Schwandt, 2001), the participants were chosen “not for their representativeness but for their relevance to the research questions and explanation of the account being developed” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 232) in this study. It was not my intention to depict the social phenomena of parent involvement but, through a critical lens, to understand what the selected parents expect of the school, how they see themselves in the social system known as "school" and how their role contributes to the academic standing of their children.

The parents invited to participate in this study had particular relevance to the questions I have posed because they were parents who the school considered inactive in parent involvement activities. As Patton (2002) explained, "The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study and interaction will illuminate the questions in this study" (p. 46). Inasmuch as the research participants are those who do not usually participate in formal parent involvement structures, they provided rich information about why this is the case. It was through their stories about their experiences at school that I gained insight about how they construct meaning from the parent-school relationship.

Data Collection Method

The qualitative data collection methods of observation that yield detailed, thick description, inquiry through in-depth interviews that capture direct quotations about personal perspectives and experiences, and careful document review (Patton, 2002, p. 40) were used to inform this study. Borrowed from early anthropologists and now widely shared by ethnographers, I employed the participant-observation method to understand the social context of the participants' world, having experienced it with them rather than as an observer at a distance (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2005).

As a participant observer, I interviewed three of the participants in their respective homes. I entered the homes of Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez and Ms. Vazquez. In addition, I interviewed two participants at a school (Ms. Huizar and Mrs. Santos) and the remaining two participants at a local restaurant (Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez). Each participant was interviewed on two different occasions from February through October and engaged in a two-hour semi-structured interview (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Each of the seven parents I interviewed had initial questions about who I was and queried me extensively about my purpose in interviewing them. I sensed a great deal of apprehension on their part about participating in a doctoral study. Specifically, they wondered if any of what they were saying would be held against them or their children. After I explained that my purpose was to study their perceptions about parent involvement and their role in the education of their children, and how they were chosen, they seemed eager to help. Specifically, I told them they had been recommended by the school principal and their child's teacher because of their child's record of academic excellence. Lastly, I explained that I wanted to understand the thoughts of parents who have experienced schooling firsthand in the U.S. public school system.

To ensure that I asked the same general questions of each respondent (Patton, 2002), I developed an interview guide (Patton, 2002) of general questions to solicit responses allowing the parents to define their understanding of parent involvement, describe their role in the education of their child, explain their experiences with the school, and express their expectations of the school. Coupled with the interview guide, I developed an interview protocol to effectively and efficiently record information obtained from the field observations.

The initial questioning techniques began with standardized questions. Later in the first interview and throughout the second interview, I continued the conversation with open-ended interview questions (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview, combining an interview guide approach with open-ended questions, allowed for the dialogic process of communication and the joint construction of accounts of social life in the conversation and subsequent reflection (Schwandt, 2001, p. 163).

Each individual interview session was audio-taped and responses were transcribed. Each participant was also asked to maintain a journal over the course of two months in which the participant wrote reflections, primarily about interactions with school personnel, and each was also encouraged to write about any school-related thoughts. I asked each participant to limit his written entries to four, from which I randomly selected two entries to review. Of the seven participants, only two, however, made journal entries. Instead, they preferred to call me when they had an idea or an experience to share. As a result, I took extensive field notes documenting our conversations. Throughout the data collection phase of the study, I maintained a personal audio-journal to chronicle my thoughts after each individual interview session.

Finally, in order to gain understanding of the philosophy of the school system about the role of parents in the schooling process, I reviewed documents created by the school district and the schools with which the parents most identify. Documents included newsletters, letters to parents, community news stories, parent activity notices, parent-centered bulletin board displays, and parent involvement policies and programs. The review of the documents proved to be useful in garnering more information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 2002) and allowed me the opportunity to review the information in a convenient manner.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to engaging any participant in the data collection process—individual interview sessions—I explained to each participant, orally and in writing, the research objectives, the data collection process and how the data would be used (Fontana & Frey, 2005). I secured a written consent and commitment to participate in all aspects of the study for the duration. As explained before, several of the parents had questions about the study and seemed somewhat leery about participating in an exercise they perceived might have negative repercussions for their children. As a result, I spent the first few minutes of each interview answering their questions in an attempt to ease any fears they may have had and build rapport (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Moreover, I filed all appropriate forms with the Institutional Review Board and the participants were informed about and have access to all transcripts and written interpretations in which the participants were involved. I interviewed one parent who was not born in the United States. Inasmuch as this was a specific criterion of my study, I disregarded her testimony. All of the other participants met the criteria of participant selection.

They were second- or third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents, whose primary language is English, who themselves had attended school in the United States, whose children were high academic performers and who the school considered to be non-involved in the schooling process.

Data Analysis

As data were collected, analysis of that data was ongoing and simultaneous (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2005). As anticipated, the data collection methods that I selected yielded massive amounts of information and warranted that I develop a manageable system for organizing and indexing the material. Further, it was necessary to develop a classification scheme to easily retrieve information as needed (Patton, 2002). Throughout the data analysis process, data were recorded, transcribed, and continuously indexed or coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Specifically, the data analysis process involved a methodical process of breaking down the information presented in the transcripts and other sources of data. First, I read each transcript, document, and journal entry. I then assigned a color to each of the parents and highlighted the lines of their respective texts in their assigned color. I assigned a specific color to the documents and another to journal entries. After reviewing all of the texts, I cut chunks of lines from the transcripts, documents, and journals and pasted each section on a separate index card; each section of lines represented an answer to a question or thought. The index cards were then sorted by common phrases or thoughts. By using a focused coding technique, patterns or concepts that best represented the participants' voices surfaced. The codes were reviewed and categories or themes were then developed. I repeatedly reviewed the index cards and made adjustments, constantly comparing new data to the categories, deleting some and expanding on others, in an effort to be more clear about the developing themes drawn from all the sources of data—in-depth interviews, observation, field notes, documents, and participant and researcher texts (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

Trustworthiness Concerns

To ensure trustworthiness the data were faithfully collected and then later described in an effort to present the stories of the participants (Patton, 2002). By implementing the multi-methods approach of data collection, which included individual interviews, further supplemented with observation and document review, the data were triangulated (Denzin, 1989). By triangulating the data, it reduced the likelihood of misinterpretation and makes more credible any findings (Patton, 2002).

Further, in an effort to "to represent the subjects' worlds in writing as faithfully as possible" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 36), detailed and thick description of the parents' perspectives and experiences was used (Glesne & Webb, 1993). Moreover, I repeatedly interviewed the participants until the responses reached the point of saturation. Lastly, in addition to the various methods of collecting and analyzing data, I also presented my writings and findings to my peers for review and submitted the transcripts to the participants to verify that what I had written was what they intended, a technique referred to as member checking (Patton, 2002).

Summary of the Methodology

In this chapter, I described the processes and methods that guided my research. I explained my research questions and the context of my study. In addition, I described the access I had to the research setting and then described each of the seven parents who are the subjects of this study. I also discussed the research design, data collection, and analysis methods I implemented. Lastly, I discussed the ethical considerations of this study and the efforts undertaken to ensure that the data fairly reflected the perceptions and experiences of seven second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district regarding their role in the education of their children. In the next chapter I will provide an analysis of the data.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter is an analysis of the perceptions of the seven second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents I studied regarding their role in the education of their children. Within this interpretive study and through the parents' voices, two overarching themes emerged. The themes are: (1) The parents' perceptions of their role in the schooling process and (2) The parents' perceptions of their experiences with their children's school. Included in the first theme are two sub-themes. The first sub-themes is *parents as nurturers and motivators—dream builders.* As *dream builders* the parents felt that they had to be better parents than their own and encourage their children so that they succeed in school and achieve the American Dream. The second sub-theme is *parents as advocates—dream keepers.* As *dream keepers* the parents felt the need to keep their children's dreams alive, advocating for their children when they perceived the schooling environment was hostile, unsupportive, or uncaring. Subsumed in the second theme, the parents' perceptions of their experiences with their children's school, are the sub-themes (1) The politics of parental involvement, whereby the parents had to negotiate their relationship with the school personnel and (2) the automatic default to deficit thinking in which the school personnel appeared to blame the children and their families for non-conformist behavior because of perceived deficiencies of the families.

Parents' Perceptions of Their Role in the Schooling Process

Parents as Nurturers and Motivators—Dream Builders

In defining the parents' role as dream builders, many of these parents drew from their own childhood memories. The lessons they learned, however, were not positive modeling of parenting. Instead, conversations with the participants yielded information suggesting that their parents' negative modeling of parenting served as constant reminders regarding how *not* to parent. As such, it appeared the participants had a desire to be better parents than the ones they had. This desire to be "better parents" seemed to be the impetus for the participants to become dream builders, which are nurturers and motivators for their children.

For example, Ms. Vazquez was candid in describing how her parents were not engaged with her as she was growing up. She attributed her parents' lack of engagement as a factor in her failure to acquire an adequate education, which she believed would have prepared her for a successful career and prevented her from veering in what she called *the wrong direction.*

She said:

> My parents left me to figure things out for myself. They were too busy with their own lives to notice that I was not putting attention to the right things. Basically, my mistakes have brought me to where I want more for my son. That's my priority. Sure, everyone is going to make mistakes. Nobody is perfect. But I've learned from my mistakes and I don't want Jimmy to make those kinds of mistakes either.

Ms. Vazquez clearly articulated that as a result of her lived experiences, she recognizes that the lack of guidance and the lack of presence of her parents in her schooling were strong catalysts for her to be purposefully absorbed in her child's life and educational plan for the future. She wants to nurture and motivate her child so that he avoids making the same mistakes she did growing up.

The same sentiments surfaced in a conversation with Mrs. Ramirez. When asked how her parents were involved in her upbringing and in her schooling process.

She stated:

> They weren't. That's why I made the choice to…how do I say it? That's why, when I had my first child, I was a senior in high school and I decided I'm not going to let him fall in what I fell into. I'm going to make sure that they [her son and other children] succeed. I've always been…ask him [referring to her husband]…since we got married. I won't do that to [my children] the way I had it done to me.

Mrs. Ramirez explained that she was a child of an early divorce and that her father, a police officer, and her mother, an overworked hourly wage-earner, were both too preoccupied with their lives to pay attention to her.

She added:

> I didn't have my mom pushing me. Nothing, nothing! My mother had to work sixty, seventy hours a week, you know. My parents were divorced. My mother never told me [that it could be different for me]—and I love her—I think it was like, she said, '*esa epoca* (that era), you take whatever you get.

She continued:

> My father was too busy raising another family that he chose. My mother was too busy working. And when she wasn't working she was going out. So my brothers were the ones essentially that when I would get in trouble at school or whatever [to discipline me]. I was quick and good. I knew I could do whatever I needed to do to get by and it was stupid of me because I should have had high grades. I didn't because I just did enough [to get by].

Like Ms. Vasquez, Mrs. Ramirez seemed to be saying that the perceived lack of involvement from her own parents compelled her to think about the kind of relationship she wants with her own children. During her childhood, she explained that she felt invisible and "in the way." She clearly expressed that the one thing that she knows is that she wants above all for the relationship she has with her children to be different and fulfilling; unlike the one she experienced with her own parents.

In another interview, I asked Mrs. Hernandez to speak about her relationship with her own parents.

She said:

> My parents were either busy at work or it was left up to the brother or sister and sometimes, like in my case, both my father and mother worked and my older brother, he was the one that had to help around the house and at the same time help up with our work and stuff and sometimes it was rough.

Mrs. Hernandez continued:

> I have two way (*sic*) older brothers and I think my mom was too busy with my two older brothers. That's the thing I remember. My brothers are like ten years older than me. Then it's me and my little brother and we're two years apart. I think she was too busy with the two teenagers and the little one that I kind of got forgotten or something.
>
> I had to do my homework and she wasn't there to help me a lot and I had to teach myself and I had to discipline myself and things like that. My dad was at work. My mom was a stay-at-home mom. My dad was at work all the time and she stayed home all the time but I think, with a little push, a little more confidence, I could have [succeeded].

Unlike the others, who seemed to wear their painful childhood experiences like badges of courage and battle standards, Mrs. Hernandez's voice faded and her head dropped as she told her story. It was noticeable that this memory seemed a source of significant pain. It appeared that Mrs. Hernandez wants to spare her children from having the same negative and painful memories she had experienced, inasmuch as she expressed:

> I think back to my childhood and my Mom was there but I think she was busy with my brothers, more than me. I think she felt that I would be okay and take care of myself. But with my daughters, I want to be there and I want to be involved with them for the rest of their lives. I don't know if it is natural, but I don't want them to work as hard as I do.

Mr. Hernandez sat next to his wife and confirmed that the times were different for him and that he wanted his daughter and stepdaughter to know that he was involved in their lives, unlike his experiences:

> Times were different I guess. I am a guy growing up in south Texas. Your parents just didn't sit you down and talk to you the way I think we do now. I was just supposed to know what to do and do it. Maybe if they would have kicked me to finish school, I might have a better job than being a custodian.

He, too, seemed to lament the lack of attention from his parents and eager to play a significant role in his daughters' lives. He repeatedly said that he was going to be sure that his daughters had a different life than his own.

During the individual sessions with the aforementioned participants, each seemed to express a paramount sense of responsibility and need to have a strong relationship with their children in order to keep them motivated and eager to succeed. Each described the absences of their own parents in their lives as they were growing up and how this absence impacted their parenting style. It seems that the apparent lack of support during the participants' early lives compelled them to purposefully engage themselves in their own children's lives and in the schooling process.

After discussing how each of the participants' parents was involved in their upbringing and in their schooling process, the next set of questions asked each of the participants to define parent involvement. The parents were consistent in their opinion that parent involvement is the role parents play in motivating their children to do well in school. Motivating their children was seen as essential for their children to accomplish their goals, have a better life—attain the American dream.

Mrs. Santos stated:

> I think that parent involvement is not just at school. I think that the main involvement would be at home because, at home, that's where everything springs out from. To me, in my opinion, from how well you are feeding your kid, to making sure they are doing their homework, to making sure they get to bed on time and showered and changed and ready, you know, for school and just being involved in their homework. To me, I think that's parent involvement. It has to be, so that they can do well, finish school and go on to bigger and better things.

Similarly defining parent involvement, Mrs. Hernandez stated:

> [Parent involvement] starts at home. The manners, teaching her [daughter] the priorities in life and teaching her what is going to be important in life. That's my goal—to make sure that later on in life, they're going to be okay. Her first teacher is me.

Adding to this notion that the main source of parental involvement is what goes on at home, Ms. Vasquez stated:

> Well to me, some of [parent involvement] pertains to activities at school, but to me, being a single parent, parent involvement is staying on top of [my son]. I may baby him too much—you know, like walk with him holding my hand. But I'm really, really adamant about class work, schoolwork, homework, practicing reading and so on and so forth. But a lot for me, the majority of parent involvement has a lot to do with the home.

All of the participants described parent involvement as beginning at home and, more specifically; it begins with lessons they teach their children about how to be productive and contributing citizens or *ser bien educados* [be well-educated]. Further, although the parents seemed to clearly see themselves actively involved in their child's schooling and in a supportive role to the school, they did not necessarily connect their home activities with the activities of the school. More specifically, they see themselves as the nurturer and caretaker of their children's health, social and emotional well-being and again, they seemed to see their role as involved parents stemming primarily from teachings or lessons they provide at the home.

In addition to seeing their role as nurturers and caretakers, the parents also seemed to see themselves as their children's motivators. In this role, the parents seemed to believe that it is their job to make sure that their children understand that the road to success is paved with hard work and that with dedication and a strong academic preparation any goal can be accomplished. Further, each of the parents seemed to take on the role as motivator with fervor. The apparent passion with which they described the aspirations they have for their children is most likely born from their personal experiences of poverty and hardship; a destiny they want to spare their children.

Illustrating this point, Mrs. Ramirez noted in her interview that in order to help her children understand that nothing in this world comes easily and that it takes a good education to get ahead, she makes her children's lessons relevant and meaningful.

She said:

> [Referring to her children] I sat them down one day, all of them. I said look at this. And I showed them our bills and I said look at this. You don't want to do this. You don't want to struggle this way. So, do good in school so you can have a better life. You don't have to worry like we worry [motioning to her husband and he confirmed her statement].

Ms. Vazquez also noted that she has high aspirations for her son and takes her role as his champion seriously.

She ardently said:

> [I] want things to come naturally and easy for him [her son]. I don't want for him to have to struggle for anything. I don't want him to struggle for money, for basic things…I just want him to be happy. I always tell him, my motto to him…Just do it once. If you like it, you like it. If you don't, you don't. And that's why I want him to try everything. I just want him to be successful in anything he does. He's always told me that he wants to be a teacher. And that's a good thing. I tell him to stay with that if that's what he wants to be, but I tell him he doesn't have to just be a teacher. He could be a principal, you know. And I even told him, you could be a professor at a university. I've said the sky is the limit with you.

Ms. Huizar similarly stated that she has heart to heart conversations with her sons about their education so that they understand that they need to do well in school in order to get a head in life.

She said:

> I tell them [education is] important because if they don't get an education, it's like you won't be able to be the doctors or lawyers or whatever they want to be. It's the right thing for them to get an education. I tell them, the bad thing is, there are a lot of examples on the streets of what can happen when you don't get your education. You end up like them [referring to street bums and gang members].

Ms. Huizar also explained that her desires and aspirations for her children are rooted in her own disappointments with her lack of education and the hardships she and her family have suffered as a result. Specifically, she recounted her own mother's experience of not knowing how to read and write and the obvious pain of embarrassment she and her mother suffer when she stands in front of her grandchildren and is not able to read something. Ms. Huizar described what she said to her children on an occasion when they asked why grandma cannot read,

> When [my mother] leaves, we tell them its not okay not to read and write because you're going to go somewhere and they are going to give you a letter or they are going to tell you to read this and that and you'll be struggling and, unfortunately, there will be people laughing at you. It's not a joke. We always tell them that it is not a joke. You have to learn what you have to learn.

Though the lesson is a difficult one, Ms. Huizar explained that she seizes every opportunity to convey to her children her aspirations for their success. She explained that she tells them that she wants them to have a better life than she has had and in order to get there, they have to do well in school.

Consistent with the other parents, Mrs. Santos explained that she tells her children nightly stories describing the tales and adventures of two fictitious characters, Hurley and Harley in an effort to motivate them to achieve. She believes that the characters she created give her children a realistic glimpse into their future with and without an education.

She said:

> We have this little story about Hurley and Harley. Hurley never wanted to study in school. Hurley didn't study and he didn't want to do his homework. He wanted to play in class, so when he graduated he had to work hard—like washing dishes in a restaurant or working really hard in the sun as a carpenter. I explain to them that there's nothing wrong with those jobs, nothing wrong with it. My dad did it. My brothers did it. But I said, 'your Grandpa's old already. He can't work anymore because his knees hurt him, his back hurts him and he struggles because that is the only life he's known.' So Hurley, because he didn't study has these hard jobs. And Harley—well, he studied. He came home. He did his homework. He wasn't playing in class, he took it serious. Now he is graduated, he's in college. He has a nice car and everything he wants. I ask them, 'what kind of life do you want?'

Mrs. Santos' stories of Hurley and Harley come from her own experience as someone who did not graduate from high school and consequently missed out on opportunities that would have provided better financial security for her family.

She said:

> Because I didn't finish school, I went up to the 11th grade, I was only two months from being a senior and that has hurt me along the way because when it comes to jobs, they always ask, 'what grade did you complete?' That has hindered me from getting better jobs. I know I could do that job, but because I don't have that high school diploma or whatever, that has hindered me throughout my life. Even throughout my adulthood, it has affected me from getting those good jobs and making that money. That's one thing when I got married and the bills add up. If I had some kind of education, period, and that's not even including college, I could be doing a lot better. I've seen that it has played a big difference—would have made a big difference if I would have finished. And that's what I want for my kids because, man, it is tough out there and you really don't know until you are out there.

Mrs. Santos' hardships, which she believes is a result of her failure to get a good education and graduate, seem to drive her to take on the role as her children's motivator. Moreover, in addition to her own difficulties providing financially for her children, Mrs. Santos was influenced by her upbringing and the difficulties her father had providing for her and her siblings. She explained that she watched her father get up every morning and work hard as a laborer just to make ends meet so he could provide for the family. As she explained, "He is hard working man, but now, he is in his seventies and can't work outside any more. It is killing him to know that he can't support his family. I won't let this happen to my children."

Continuing on this point, she said:

> [From the minute they were born] I knew I had to prepare them for the future. I knew I had to prepare them for what was ahead and if I didn't do that with

> them now, and then later, they started to struggle, well I don't want my kids to be dropping out of school.

She further stated:

> I want them to go to college. That's another big thing my parents never pushed—school, never pushed college. I didn't know anything about college until my kids. And now you see it on TV and that's when I started 'Wow that sounds pretty interesting.' And then my husband started going to college and he was the same way. His parents never pushed him. I was more about work when we were growing up. He graduated but he went straight to work.

This desire to motivate their children to achieve was recounted by each parent. When asked what she wanted for her children's future, Ms. Huizar replied, "Go to college. They're into sports so if it could happen maybe get a sports scholarship—to go to college. I didn't have that." However, although all the parents expressed a sincere and nurturing side to their parenting, they, also, proudly described their "no excuses" attitude toward school success. Consistently streaming through their conversations were comments such as, "I just won't have it," "failure is not an option," or "not in my house." The parents all seemed to be saying that their primary role as a parent is, first, to ensure that their children are nurtured, well–cared for, and, next, to motivate their children to do well in school. This nurturing and motivating, they felt, would prevent their children from experiencing a life of hardship. It would allow their children to dream and to realize their dreams. Thus, the parents in this study seemed to see themselves as nurturers and motivators as *dream builders*.

Parents as Advocates—Dream Keepers

In addition to their roles as nurtures and motivators—*dream builders*, the parents seem to have assumed an additional role. They seemed to have become their children's protectors and advocates—*dream keepers*. They explained that they saw themselves not only as their children's protectors from physical harm, but also as their children's advocates, ensuring that their self-esteem remained in tact and their hopes, dreams stayed alive.

The parents articulated, in an almost activist voice, a strong sense of needing to shield their children from the kind of suffering they experienced as children in the public school system. Again, drawing from their own negative childhood experiences, the parents seem compelled to protect their children from those persons at the school who have low expectations of their children. They seemed to believe that school personnel have low expectations of their children's academic performance and social development because they believe that teachers negatively judge them because of where they live or because they have fewer resources than others. Further, it seems that the lack of presence of or support from their own parents during their schooling process motivated them to be overtly involved in an advocacy role to keep their children's hopes and dreams alive. As such, the parents see themselves as their children's advocates—*dream keepers*.

The need to serve as her child's advocate is notable in the conversations with Mrs. Ramirez. She explained that her disdain for the public school system stems from negative past experiences she has had with school personnel. An interesting notion surfaced, when I asked her who among her children’s teachers she would consider good. She could only name two teachers, and her comments seemed centered mostly the positive interactions she had with the teachers rather than on their actual teaching qualities. She quickly noted that all of her children’s other teachers were poor, based on her negative interactions with them. Her perceptions of the teachers’ ineptness seemed to be based on her experiences with them on specific incidents in which her children were either hurt physically or emotionally. She explained that on one occasion her son fell while on the playground, hurting his leg. According to Mrs. Ramirez, the school staff supervising the incident did not feel that the situation was serious enough to warrant immediate care. Instead, the staff person suggested that two students, both of smaller stature, help her son to the nurse’s clinic, though, as she described, her son was writhing in pain. Once at the nurse’s office, it was determined that he seemed to have broken his leg and, according to the treating doctor’s opinion, his leg was injured more so because of the way he had been moved. This action caused Mrs. Ramirez’s son a lengthier treatment and recuperation period and also exacerbated Mrs. Ramirez’s feelings that the school staff was inept. As Mrs. Ramirez recounted this story, the memory of this incident seemed to cause her to get angry once again. Remembering the incident, she said she was compelled to “go to the school and fight for my son. How dare they treat him that way? They want to treat me like I’m nothing? Fine, but don’t do that to my son, or my nails will come out.”

The incident in which Mrs. Ramirez’s son was involved is one of many vivid examples she shared to depict her negative portrayal of the school personnel. Based on these experiences and her general disregard for the teachers, Mrs. Ramirez seemed to feel that she needed to protect her son and advocate for him. In her final comments about this incident she said, “Those teachers don’t care about him. They will treat him badly because they don’t like me or maybe because they think we are nobodies.”

Ms. Vazquez, also, depicted a situation in which she described school personnel in a negative context because of how she perceived they routinely hurt her son. She described a time when her son was involved in an altercation with another student. The teacher disciplined her child and because, as Ms. Vasquez stated, “he is a sensitive child,” his eyes began to tear. In seeing him tear up, the teacher, according to Ms. Vazquez, laughed at him, called the other students’ attention to him and then introduced him to the class as “Ms. Vazquez.” This she felt was the teacher’ attempt to characterize crying as feminine and chastise her son. Again, the recall of that memory caused Ms. Vazquez to note the base wrongness of that teacher’s actions. She said, “I know he is surrounded by women and that he is a little immature, but to say something like that to my child—it is unforgivable.” She added, “It is bad enough that his father is not around that much, but to say that crying is bad and makes you weak, she doesn’t have the right to do that to my son.”

Ms. Vazquez seemed angry with the school personnel for the negative treatment of her son. She also seemed helpless to make sense of why her son has been treated badly at school and even more at a loss to know how to help him. She expressed that she pushes the negative thoughts about the school out of her mind just to be able to cope with her everyday life.

Like Mrs. Vasquez and the other parents, Mrs. Santos, also, had bad experiences with the treatment of her child at schools. She described an incident in which she perceived that school personnel demonstrated a lack of consideration for her child’s needs and how she, in turn, had to advocate for her son. It seems that since Mrs. Santos’s husband was deployed to Iraq and the children’s long separation from their father it had caused one of her son’s significant anguish. Moreover, he was suffering academically. Mrs. Santos noted that school personnel—one person in particular—trivialized his anguish and told him to “suck it up” instead of exhibiting compassion and sensitivity to the situation.

She said:

> He is just a boy. He misses his father. It is hard; it is hard on all of us. Can you imagine saying something like that to a kid whose father could die any minute? He is scared. Shouldn’t they care and do something about it?

As a result of this incident and in an apparent attempt to advocate for her son, Mrs. Santos’ went to the school and, as she described it “had it out with that woman.”

All the parents in this study felt their children were mistreated at some time by school staff, which required the parents to either directly confront the adults in their children’s school or to provide care and nurturing at home in an effort to ease their children’s pain and keep them motivated to succeed. In either case, they had to advocate for their children and intervene to protect their children from the teachers whose actions, they believed, harmed their children’s self-esteem and jeopardized their children’s chances at a successful future.

Parents' Perceptions of Their Experiences with Their Children's School

The Politics of Involvement

As discussed, the parents in this study perceived their role in their child's schooling process as their children's nurturers, motivators and advocates—*dream builders* and *dream keepers.* Given that the parents wanted their children to be successful and assuming that school teachers and administrators wanted the same for their students, it would seem likely that the school would work as partners with the parents to ensure their children's success. However, based on these parents' experiences with their children's teachers, the parents seemed to be locked into a constant struggle with the school personnel, having to negotiate the parent/school relationship on a daily basis—*the politics of involvement.* In addition, the parents seemed to wrestle with how they were *supposed* to be actively involved in the school-embedded parent involvement activities, when their background, culture, daily experiences, and previous school involvement often came into conflict with the expectations of the school. For example, familial and work obligations often prevented the parents from participating in activities sanctioned by the teachers and administrators.

This need to negotiate the politics of involvement surfaced when I asked each of the parents about their specific involvement in activities sponsored by the school. Each parent took a few minutes to recall an activity in which he or she was directly involved in a school sanctioned activity. Most of the parents referenced their involvement with the organized Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or a planned activity such as Open House or an awards assembly. Their recollections of these events were negative, some more so than others. Although, most told of a confrontational situation which left them feeling dismissive of the usefulness of participating in organization such as PTA. They perceived the organization as self-serving, undirected and, most important, a waste of their time—a precious commodity.

Mrs. Ramirez offered a description of her involvement with the members of the PTA, stating that she no longer cared to be involved with them because she felt that the members really did not care about her opinion. Mr. Ramirez also echoed the same sentiments. Specifically, she said she attended a PTA meeting to offer her suggestions about how the organization could better spend monies raised through fundraising activities. She proposed spending the monies on extra-curricular activities rather than on student incentives. She said, instead of taking my suggestions into consideration, which she believed was because the PTA was being influenced by the school staff who needed to find money to fund student incentives, "They told me that I didn't understand and that they were going to keep on doing what they do because that's the way it has always been done."

She continued in saying:

> You could tell that a lot of [the members of the PTA] just wanted me to leave because I was asking questions. I wanted to know what they were doing with the money. We were doing all kinds of fundraisers and for what?

She concluded then that her role in the PTA was over mostly because she did not conform to the expectations set by other parents, whom she believed were influenced by school staff. She said, “They only want us to bring the toy or a game or this and that for the carnival. Other than that, they don’t really need us or want us in the school.”

Mrs. Ramirez categorized her interactions with the PTA as unwelcoming and had a sense that they did not really want her involved. This feeling was confirmed when soon after her confrontation at the PTA meeting, she looked through her daughter’s backpack to see if she had any notices announcing the next PTA meeting. When she did not find any, she asked her daughter if she had received any flyers. Her daughter responded, “I don’t have any, Mom, and I don’t think they want you to go.” Mrs. Ramirez asked her what prompted her to make such a comment. Her daughter explained that earlier that day, a PTA member went to her classroom to hand out the flyers. When the PTA member (who was a teacher) approached the group she was sitting in, she by passed the group and did not distribute the flyer to the three children sitting in the group. Her daughter’s comments seemed to pierce Mrs. Ramirez and she added that she felt that school personnel harbored resentment toward her because she was not silent about the ways in which the PTA spent their money. Her suspicions about their feelings toward her were again confirmed when her daughter told her that she overheard teachers and other parents make malicious comments about her; a situation that caused her daughter significant stress and strained her relationship with school personnel.

Initially, Mrs. Ramirez was hurt because her ideas were rejected by the PTA, She had joined the PTA in an effort to participate in her child’s schooling experience in the ways the school had communicated they wanted her to engage. However, when she offered her opinions, which were contrary to “the ways things are done here”, she felt unwelcome and dismissed. Moreover, in her opinion, an effort was made to purposely exclude her from any further decision making meetings in regard to the PTA. However, Mrs. Ramirez was not the only parent who felt that her attempts to participate were met with resistance or conflict. Throughout our conversations other parents seemed to have a similar story of contentious relationships with school personnel. This, then, led to their withdrawal from directly seeking out ways to be involved in school sanctioned organizations like the PTA. Instead, the parents chose to keep their distance and not volunteer for this type of involvement. However, when we discussed whether they had participated in any other type of activities at the school or how they would react should they be asked to be involved, they all stated that they would gladly participate in activities when the school called upon them. For example, all but one of the parents noted that they had participated in the planning and execution of a celebration targeted to fifth grade students. It seems however, that the parents were selective about the kind of activities in which they decided to get involved. By participating in the fifth-grade celebration planning, parents were willing to participate in an activity that had purpose and meaning for them and their children and to which they had been personally invited. Ms. Vazquez said, “I might not be able to be there every day like some of the ladies, but I will take time to help with something like my son’s 5th grade party.” Ms. Huizar said, “When they asked me to help with the 5th grade party, I said yes. I know they were surprised that I went to every meeting—I am not one of the *consentidas* (favorites).” Also, other than participating in activities that the parents felt had a specific purpose for them or resulted in a direct benefit for their child, all of the parents expressed the futility in participating in activities that they felt were designed for the “special” parents who volunteered their time in service to the school—a group to which they knew they did not belong.

This idea that there were “special” parents who were involved in the school and that the parents participating in this study believed they were not in that group was a point I felt was worth pursuing. Thus, I questioned the participants individually about what they meant when they referred to the *special* parents. All of the parents responded that they thought that the *special* parents are those who spent almost all day at school in direct service to the school. They added that this term was openly bestowed on those parents by school personnel. Ms. Vazquez and Mrs. Santos noted that the teachers often referred to the school volunteers as *great* parents. They also noted that the principal made public comments at awards assemblies saying, “*if only all the parents were more like these parents*” (referring to the school volunteers.) Mrs. Ramirez referred to them as *hovering* parents and expressed her perception and concern that these parents and their children received preferential treatment. Specifically, she said that one parent who, in her opinion, was a favorite of school personnel, approached her last year to let her know that if she wanted her daughter to be placed in a certain teacher’s classroom that she could help her get that done, citing that she had special privileges and that she would be willing to put in a good word for her.

She said:

> This particular parent approached me at the end of last school year to, basically, ask me what class I wanted my daughter in. 'Excuse me,' I said, 'What do you mean what class do I want my daughter in? My daughter is going in a class that they see is best suited for her.' I do not think that they should have special treatment. So that kind of made me very angry because it kind of, in a sense, told me, 'Hey, I rub shoulders with the best of them and I can get you in.'

It seems that the parents' perception were that only certain parents were considered the power brokers in the school and that power was granted to those parents who were in direct service to the school. The parents also seemed to think that the power broker's power increased with their increased availability to serve the school personnel and participate in school activities. The apparent elevation of some parents' status seemed to be sources of frustration for many of the parents.

Mrs. Ramirez pointed to another event to make her point about the preferential treatment that is afforded to the children of the *hovering* parents. Specifically, she felt that the daughter of one the *hovering* parents was chosen as a key or featured contributor in a special project in lieu of her daughter who had better grades and qualifications for the position. Mrs. Ramirez passionately expressed, slipping in and out of profanity and using varying intonations, her displeasure with the school's disparate treatment of her daughter and the children of other parents who were not considered involved in the education of their children because they were not physically at school. Mrs. Ramirez, like many of the parents in this study, had difficulty being directly involved at the school as they had work and family situations that precluded this involvement. For example, Mrs. Ramirez was the care taker to an aging parent as well as three-year-old twins.

She asked the question:

> How am I expected to be at school all day if I have to take care of my mother and my children? Here is what happens. If I don't care for [my mother and twin daughters], [teachers and school staff] will criticize me. 'She's a bad daughter and a bad mother.' If I tend to my mother so she can be alone for a while and then take my little ones to school with me, they look at me as if I am crazy for bringing them to school. How am I supposed to win at this game? Guess what? I am not and I don't care.

Again, many of the parents seemed to believe that school personnel assigned value only to those parents who directly served them. As such, it seemed that the actions of the school personnel to reward those parents who were in service to them and to exclude other parents who were not or who were non-conformist created a social stratification system for parents. The *good* parents were those who served the school and were then rewarded by the outward acknowledgement of them as better parents than the others and by the preferential treatment of their children. The other parents or *bad* parents were those who were not in service to the school and whose children were, therefore, subjected to a lower class status. Many of the parents expressed that they recognized that the teachers have categorized them in the lower class strata in the school's social system and lamented that they felt powerless to rectify this perceived injustice. It seemed that the binary structure of *good* parents versus *bad* parents may have been at the root of the strained relationships that all of the parents in this study seemed to have with their children's teachers and may have been another reason why they seemed to distance themselves from interacting with the school personnel.

Ms. Vazquez also seemed to know that she was characterized as a less than ideal parent because of her lack of involvement and, as such, she was treated differently. I asked her how the teachers and other parents treated her when she had an opportunity to go to a school function. Her seemingly infectious smile quickly turned downward and her voice lowered.

She said:

> [The other parents] are almost like a clique. Maybe because, believe it or not, I am shy, maybe because of the frequency of the other parents [to attend school functions]. Some of them don't work so that they can have that constant [contact]. I'm barely occasional. I don't have that constant contact [with my son's teacher] so that you can develop a relationship with that same person—one-to-one or a group.

In a sullen tone, she added:

> Unfortunately for me, working late and where I work down at the medical center, any type of after-school activities and even during-school activities, its kind of hard for me to get involved that way, although, you know, I would love to take time off to go to awards. [My son] is always saying, 'Mom, they are having breakfast with the principal,' and I can't do that.

For Ms. Vazquez, participating in school activities in lieu of satisfying her obligations at work was not an option. She is a single mother who works to provide for the care and well-being of her son and for herself. The apparent anguish on her face and her sense of helplessness told me what she wanted me to know—that she deeply cares about her son and wants the best for him, but working and providing for her son means sacrifice. She seemed painfully aware that she has been unable to participate in school activities in the way that the school wanted and that her inability to actively participate in school activities caused her son's disappointment with her.

Ms. Vazquez, like many of the other parents, also noted that, because she is a working single parent, she senses that school personnel questioned her commitment to her child's academic achievement and deemed her as an *uninvolved* and a less than *ideal* parent. She said, "Just because they don't see me everyday, it doesn't mean that I don't care. It just means that I can't—I have to work."

She went on to say:

> It's like they think I am a bad parent because I don't go to all of Jimmy's assemblies. I send my mother or my sister—and, my God, he is the smartest boy in the class. I must be doing something right.

Even though her son was the highest ranking student in his class and demonstrated a high degree of self-motivation and attention to school work, she still seemed to have difficulty in reconciling her personal internal struggle.

Much like Mrs. Vasquez, Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez expressed a desire to be perceived as *ideal* parents, according to their understanding of what the school wanted from them as parents. Mr. Hernandez mentioned that he takes his children to school every morning because he works an evening shift. As they described their commitment to their children, there seemed to be an apologetic tone in their voices. They explained that they knew that taking and picking up their daughter from school was not in line with what the school would consider parent involvement activities. (Mrs. Hernandez was a substitute teacher and she knew the type of activities teachers were looking for as parent involvement.) They repeatedly told me that Mrs.

Hernandez worked during the day and that Mr. Hernandez worked in the evening and that their schedules prevented them from contributing hours of time to the school but, nonetheless, they made sure that their children did their homework so that their children would succeed.

Mr. Hernandez said:

> We're examples of parents that are working but yet we have to take time to make sure our kids are doing their work. I know that lots of time, when I am at work, I hate to be bothered, but I get called away [by his wife]. And at that time, I will ask, if Amy has done her homework. 'Has it been checked?' That kind of stuff, I'll admit, my wife since she gets home before I do, she goes over it. I think that part of our daughter's success at school is because of us.

Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez added to the conversation about the unreasonableness of the school's expectations of them to be *involved* parents inasmuch as they, too, seemed to say that the school personnel failed to recognize that work schedules, family obligations and other constraints were the reasons for their lack of participation in school activities during the regular school day. The parents fervently wanted the school personnel to know, however, that in spite of their inactivity at the school, they were *good* parents and cared about the education of their children. They were conflicted by the dilemma of dealing with the demands of their jobs and family obligations, knowing that they cannot attend many of the school activities and also feeling that they were viewed as uninvolved parents, which they felt diminished them as parents. The daily reminders that they were not living up to the school personnel's idea of an *ideal* parent strained their relationship with the school personnel.

Automatic Default to Deficit Thinking

Each of the parents interviewed expressed an overwhelming pride in the success of their children. They attributed much of their children's success to the parents' adherence to strong values and insistence on excellence. They noted, however, that though they knew that their children's successes stemmed from their positive influences, the school treated the parents as if they were invisible and dismissed their efforts and influences in that success. Specifically, they said that their efforts to ensure that their children's homework was completed in a timely manner and that their children were well-cared for and ready to learn when they get to school were ignored. Moreover, they expressed a feeling that the school personnel thought of them as deficient in some way. Each of the parents explained that on various occasions they had been made to feel that if something went wrong at school, such as their child failing to complete homework or committing a disciplinary infraction, it must have been due to their lack of or poor parenting skills. Indeed, it seemed to the parents that the school personnel *automatically defaulted to deficit thinking about the parents and their children.*

During one of the interviews with Ms. Vazquez, she continuously discussed her desire for the school personnel to know her, not just as the parent of Jimmy, but to understand the aspirations she had for her son, and to refrain from making judgments about her because of her marital status, income and the geography of her residence. She recounted an experience she had with her son's third-grade teacher to illustrate her point. During Jimmy's 3rd grade year, Ms. Vazquez developed pneumonia and had to be hospitalized. While she was in the hospital, her son was involved in an incident in which he pushed a little girl who had been picking on him and the little girl fell.

She explained:

> Someone was picking on him, picking on him and he retaliated. There were a lot of things going on then. Not that that's an excuse, but it is really hard to stop and have to explain to everyone that my son's acting out might have been because I was sick and he was worried about me. I think what I'm trying to get across is [that teachers need to try] understanding [children in general] and me more. I'm not saying that they're not going to get punished or are correct, but trying to understand them more, try to see where they are coming from.

She went on to describe the subsequent parent conference she had with her son's teacher to discuss his disciplinary consequences:

> The people around him had even said [in retelling what happened on the playground], 'That's not like him. His mom is a good mom,' and so on. But the teacher right away assumed that [Jimmy was a bad kid] because I'm a single parent and maybe because of the side of town we live on. [The teacher said] statistics show that young boys being raised by a single parent are prone to go this way [referring to the teacher's assumption about the probability of her child ending up in prison because of his background. You know, I was just listening to her and thinking—I was raised by a single parent. Does that make me automatically a bad parent and mean that Jimmy is going to end up being a statistic [by being sent to prison]?

It caught me by surprise that a teacher would make sweeping generalizations about the future of one child based on one incident so I asked Ms. Vasquez to clarify what she understood the teacher had said. She said the teacher told her, "Yes, it looks like he is headed that way [referring to going down the wrong road]." Ms. Vazquez was quick to defend herself and her son and to discount the teacher's statements and returned to describing the conversation with her son’s teacher. Ms. Vasquez said she told the teacher:

> I don’t know what you are trying to say. I try to do the best that I can for my son. Just because I am a single parent and I don’t have a college education, it doesn’t mean that I don’t want more for my son.

Ms. Vazquez explained that she felt that the school devalued her abilities as a parent and criminalized the actions of her son because she was a single mother, Hispanic and lived in an economically depressed area of the city. She said, “I think because of the side of town we live in, I think maybe because we’re Hispanic, a minority.” She explained that she felt judged daily for these circumstances that she said were beyond her control.

Mrs. Santos, usually one of the more reserved parents during her interviews, echoed the same sentiments when she described an incident involving one of her sons. In an elevated voice, she said that one afternoon she received a note from her child’s teacher stating that she needed to put her child to sleep earlier because he had bags under his eyes.

She said:

> The teacher started accusing me of not taking care of him and, oh, that made me very upset because never did she try to come ask me. Never did she communicate with me and, all of a sudden, I am a bad parent. That’s how that note made me feel and I flared up. I am sorry I did. It made me upset because I work hard with my kids. I make sure they’re in bed. I make sure they take a shower. I feed them. I do everything. And for her to come and tell me in a note.

She was upset that the teacher had apparently reached the conclusion that she was derelict in her duty of ensuring that her son went to bed early and that the teacher felt compelled to instruct her in how to parent her son. According to Mrs. Santos, what the teacher failed to know is that her son suffers from severe asthma and that the bags under his eyes came as a result of that medical condition, not just a case of poor sleep habits or of poor parenting, as was suggested by the teacher. Mrs. Santos felt that she has been indicted as an ignorant and *bad* parent who was purposefully harming her son by not putting him to bed early. She subsequently set a meeting with the principal and the teacher to discuss the issue, during which she told the teacher:

> 'In this note, you accused me of this and this and that, but you don't know that my son has asthma and he gets sick. And as far as putting my kids to bed, I do put them to bed.' I was very upset because [the teacher] made it sound as if I don't care for my kids, and I took it personally because I work with my kids. That's why they do so well in school.

Mrs. Santos felt she had been characterized as a *bad* parent by the teacher even though the teacher did not know her or have enough information to make such a presumption about her ability to parent her child. She also seemed to be upset that the teacher did not contact her to find out the facts, but rather jumped to a conclusion and then wrote a note telling Mrs. Santos how to handle her own child—assuming that the parent needed the teacher's help because she lacked adequate parenting skills—judging her as deficient as a parent.

Like Ms. Vazquez and Mrs. Santos, Mrs. Ramirez had numerous opinions about her feelings toward the teachers and how she perceived that they devalued her parenting skills. She explained that the teachers had an air of superiority and often took the time to make disparaging remarks about their parenting skills. She surmised that the teachers' disposition toward her was couched in prejudice and stereotypical judgments about Mexicans and people who live in poverty.

When I asked how the teachers acted toward her, Mrs. Ramirez responded by imitating a snobbish person saying, "Very cocky—I have a degree. You're just some west side mom—big fat lady—who just comes to bring her kids to school and haven't a clue about how to be a good parent." Mrs. Ramirez seemed to believe that because of her appearance, economic status or ethnicity, the school personnel had judged her to be inferior as an individual and as a parent.

She said:

> If [teachers] are going to sit in front of me and judge because of my weight or how I look or how I talk, I'm going to call them on it. It's not that I don't want to have a college degree. Just don't talk down to me. But some parents won't do that. You know some are going to hover. Some of them are going to get downright rowdy. I saw an altercation the other day between coach and the lady with tattoos and short shorts—[the parent] went off on her. I mean that's the kind of thing that is going to happen when you treat people the way they do, without any respect, in that school.

Mrs. Ramirez further added to her perception that school personnel negatively judged her because of her ethnicity by stating, "In their minds they're thinking, 'I've got to deal with this Mexican lady. She's coming in with all these kids, in this big van.'" She added that because of this feeling, she did not go to the school.

She said:

> …because I feel like they look at me like 'this bitch doesn't have any business being in here.' I really feel like that. You cannot belittle people that walk in there when you have them on your staff. You just can't do that.

She also recounted another story to support her contention that the white teachers and even some of the degreed Hispanic teachers held stereotypical beliefs about her and her family. She said that one day her son told her that staff members at the school jokingly called his father a *Frito Bandito* because they thought he looked like a *Bandito*—a biker. (Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez were both in the room during this interview. When Mrs. Ramirez made this comment, she pointed to Mr. Ramirez' bushy moustache while he stood silently by.) She added that when the staff says things like this, it gives license to the other students who hear these remarks to make their own disparaging comments about her children and herself and her husband. She indignantly repeated that other children began referring to Mr. Ramirez as being *greasy* or a *dirty Mex-chanic*—a disparaging remark fusing the fact that he was a mechanic and Mexican (Mr. Ramirez was visibly angered by the comments). Mrs. Ramirez did not cower at such personally offensive comments but, instead, became outraged. Her dramatic gestures and intonation clearly indicated that she did not accept such behavior but, rather than fight a system that she perceived to be entrenched in negativity, she would just not be an active member of the school community She said, *"¡No quiero meterme—no!"* [I don't want to get involved].

During my conversation with Mr. Hernandez, I asked him about how he thought the teachers felt about him as a parent in an attempt to find out if he, too, had a contentious relationship with the school personnel. He offered his opinion stating that he and his wife sent their daughter to school well-groomed and dressed so that teachers would not think of them as bad parents and form negative thoughts about his daughter.

He said:

> I know teachers will already have a mind set of a student's parent just by the way the kid is in school. If the kid goes to school all raggedy, that's going to give the perception that the parent needs to care about how the kid dresses. The flip side to that story is if the kid is well-groomed, the teacher will already have in their mind that, 'Hey, [pointing to himself and then to his daughter] at least this parent cares about how this child looks even if they don't have all the money in the world.'

He closed in saying, "I can tell you, I have substituted and I have seen it. I came to some of these conclusions myself. It's easy to draw because you're seeing it." Both Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez said that they wanted to protect their daughter from the heartache of prejudice from teachers because of their economic status, adding, "You can still be poor and go to school clean." Both of Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez exhibited a strong sense of pride in their ability to afford their children a happy and clean household, with rules, regulations that would help them succeed in life, and they were not going to let school personnel, whom they considered judgmental about poor families, stump their child's self-esteem and academic progress.

Unlike the responses I received from most of the parents, Ms. Huizar was quick to note that her experiences with the school had always been positive. However, as we became more familiar and after I probed a little more, she soon remembered the time her daughter, who was four years old at the time, had been suspended from school for kicking her teacher. She noted that she thought that suspending a four-year old child for kicking the teacher was more a result of the teacher's hurt feelings than the actual act of hurting her and that it was probably more excessive than necessary. I sensed a feeling of defenselessness as she tried to explain the situation to me, especially because she said that her daughter explained that she kicked the teacher because the teacher had made a negative remark to the child about her mother [Ms. Huizar]. According to her daughter, the teacher commented on the way Ms. Huizar was dressed that morning and then made an ugly face. When Ms. Huizar addressed this issue with the teacher she denied it. When Ms. Huizar took the issue to the school administration, rather than investigating the possibility that the incident occurred in the way that the child described, the school administration lay blame for the child's infraction solely on Ms. Huizar's daughter, It was Ms. Huizar's perception that the school personnel considered her lacking in parenting skills because she failed to control her four-year old daughter; if she had better parenting skills, her daughter would not have kicked the teacher. Further, Ms. Huizar concluded that in a situation where a child misbehaved, the teacher's opinion was the only voice that would be heard—the voices of the children would be dismissed and the blame would rest with the parents. She said, *"era cosa de la maestra—no de mi hija."* [It was the teacher's thing, not my daughter's]. She added, *"Pero no van a creer a una niña."* [But they are not going to believe a little girl.] Further, it was this parent's perception that she had no recourse to present her case and should she have tried to present a contraposition, she would have been seen as an uncooperative and *bad* parent. She said, *"¿Y por qué decir nada?—No soy estupida. Sí digo algo, mi hija lo paga—mejor quedar sin decir nada. Sí no, pagamos las dos."* [Why say anything? I am not stupid. If I say something, my daughter pays for it. It's better to stay without saying anything. If not, both of us will pay].

Not only did the parents feel that the school personnel automatically considered that all negative experiences at the school were a direct result of deficit homes and parents, but the parents also expressed their feelings that school personnel devalued the parents' influence in the success of their children. Specifically, it was the parents' perception that the school personnel failed to recognize the positive influences the parents had on their children and how these influences were carried into the formal structures of the school and contributed to their children's academic success. For example, the parents cited the exemplary academic and attendance records of their children and their children's numerous awards and accolades. This they felt was support of their premise that their influences contributed to the academic success of their children, in spite of the many negative school practices and systems they negotiated on a daily basis.

To illustrate, Ms. Vazquez recounted her experience at the end-of-year awards assembly during which she learned that her son would receive a number of awards. She noted that she had taken off from work to attend her son's last assembly in elementary school.

She recalled:

> I am not that close to Jimmy's teachers because of my work and the location. I can't be leaving [work] often. I feel that there's a barrier there. However, this past year Jimmy's grades were phenomenal; I was totally surprised. At the end of the year, Jimmy blew everybody out of the water. So I decided on my own to go his last awards assembly. I didn't have that kind of communication with the teacher [for her to tell me], but the kids knew. When the awards were being presented and they had the *Best Boy* category, all of the kids were saying, 'I bet you it's Jimmy. I bet you it's Jimmy?' I was in the back row. Okay, then they started calling out Jimmy's name for every thing—

> the first award, the second award, the third award. He got everything, but because I am not involved face-wise [with the teacher], I didn't know.

As she told me the story, her voice became aggressive. She was irritated. Most irritating to her was the fact that she did not know ahead of time that her son was going to be honored. She said, "I was lucky that I asked for the time off. Can you imagine if I had missed it? I would never have forgiven myself. I would have hurt Jimmy, and that would have killed me." She seemed to brood a moment and shook her head. She spontaneously added that her son's success was directly related to her disciplined household, high expectations, and familial support; her smile expressed a sense of accomplishment as a parent. However, her smile promptly extinguished when I asked her if the school had acknowledged her or other parents for their efforts in the successes of their children.

She said:

> I don't recall being recognized, not even a thank you for helping to make sure Jimmy did his work and came to school every day. It is like we don't exist. Only the teachers are responsible for the good grades and success. I don't think so!

Again, her comments shifted to her perception that school personnel ignored her because she is a single Hispanic mother with a humble home and was not involved at school in the way that other parents seemed to be. She repeated that she felt judged. Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez, too, during their interview, shared thoughts that supported Ms. Vazquez's perception that school personnel treated them differently because of the aforementioned reasons and added that their physical appearance played a significant role in whether the school would treat them in a positive or negative manner. Specifically, Mrs. Ramirez recalled the comments made by school staff when her husband dressed for a visit to the school. The staff member said "Mr. Ramirez is good looking."

She added:

> Well, you know, and then they see him in a different way. I mean we clean up nice when we need to but it is a stereotype. When we're dressed nice and we go in together, they don't act that way. They don't have that kind of 'look-down-on-me' attitude. When I'm by myself with all of my kids, that's when I get the problems, so I don't want to go. I don't want to go in there. What's the point?

My interest then turned to Mrs. Ramirez' perceptions of how school personnel treated her daughter, a beautiful tall slender girl, in light of the fact that, from her perspective, they seemed to judge her husband and her for their physical appearance.

She said:

> Well, I would hope they aren't [thinking badly about her] I think they're probably thinking, 'Gosh I hope she doesn't end up like her mom.' You know, for some reason, people think that fat people are stupid and we're not. I mean that's been scientifically proven. They think that because you are obese that you are dirty, that you are nasty, that you live like a pig and that you don't know how to eat healthy. It's just all a big misconception and I don't want them to think that about her.

Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez added that on an occasion, Allison told one of her teachers that her mother was half Anglo and that the teacher seemed to treat her differently as a result. She said, "And then they took a whole different attitude with me. See? So that says a lot in that kind of crap."

Moreover, the parents' feelings that they were being judged—because of their physical appearance, residence, geography, and economical status—added to their perception that school personnel considered them as deficient in some way. In turn and because of these judgments, they also perceived that school personnel had low expectations of their children.

Specifically, Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez worried about the expectations the school held for their daughter. Specifically, they feared that the teachers were not spending an appropriate amount of time working with their daughter to provide a rigorous quality education. Mr. Ramirez added, "¡*Yo no mas quiero que los niños siguen adelante!"* (I just want the children to get ahead.) Also concerned about the expectations of the teachers and quality of instruction was Ms. Vazquez. She felt that the teachers were just considering her son to be a statistic and criminalized his behavior, even though her son received accolades for the most academically successful student in the fifth grade. This anomaly perplexed Ms. Vazquez and contributed to her perception that the school personnel negatively judged her and that they believed that her son's successes were a result of the teachers' influence and efforts and not hers as a parent. Voicing a somewhat different concern, Ms. Huizar worried that her child's prowess as an athlete would overshadow his academic career and that teachers would ignore the need for rigorous instruction so he could get a scholarship to college. She said, "They can't just concentrate on the fact that he is a good ball player. They need to make sure he can get into college, graduate so he can get a good job." Whereas, Mrs. Santos stated that she had suspicions that her son was not getting the added emotional support he needed to stay focused on academics while his father was serving in Iraq. She said, "He is taking it hard that his father is in

Iraq, but sometimes I feel like they don't care. Instead of giving him some extra help or a pat on the back, they just ignore him."

Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez, though vocal about the stereotypes and biases they knew some teachers had, remained somewhat reserved in their comments about their perceptions of the expectations the teachers had of their daughter, Amy. Nonetheless, they plainly wanted me to know that they believed that their efforts in the home contributed to their daughter's success rather than the influences of the teachers.

It seemed evident that the parents I interviewed resented the negative attitude of the school personnel toward their children and them. Obvious, too, was the guarded tone I sensed from all but one of the parents (Mrs. Ramirez) about speaking too negatively about the school—as if, somehow, to be too negative would be construed in some way as anti-school. Clearly, the participants were not anti-school. In contrast, they could be identified as pro-school because each understood that a quality education was necessary in order to succeed in life and to achieve the American dream of happiness and wealth. The risk of challenging the school system to more accurately reflect their role in the education of their children or conforming to embedded school structures was obviously too great. Instead, they preferred to silence their displeasure. Their fear, as I perceived, was based in a fear that their criticisms might have resulted in retaliation against their children. Their personal oppositional experiences seemed to have contributed to each family's re-construction of their involvement in the education of their children.

Though the parents I interviewed struggled with work schedules and the obligations of running a household and raising children, each family had articulated systems and structures within their respective households to support their children's emotional, social and academic success. The setting of a routine for the children to complete homework or to comply with academic obligations seemed at the forefront of each parent's plan for academic success.

Ms. Vazquez said:

> I expect homework to be done by the time I pick him up. There are times when he has problems, like with math problems, and my mom can't help him, my sister can't help him. So I'll come home and figure it out. He does all of his reading and responds with me. He reads for about five minutes—not to me, but he'll read for five minutes and then write what he read about. Then he'll discuss it with me every once in a while. When I come home, I'll settle in for a little bit and then I come in and say, 'Let me see your homework,' and I'll go over his homework.

In Ms. Huizar's interview, she explained that she checked over her son's homework to make sure that it was done and done correctly. She said, "We sit there until it gets done." She also added that her son is not able to participate in his extra-curricular activities until he has completed all of his homework or school projects. She said, "They have to finish their homework in order to go to practice."

Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez, too, during their interview, expressed the importance of completing homework.

Mrs. Hernandez said:

> [Amy] knows that as soon as I come home from school, I will ask, 'Where is the homework,' and she knows that it's going to get checked. There is not a day that passes Monday through Thursday. She's been blessed that she hasn't had a teacher that gives her weekend homework, but I know that there are some. But she knows that as soon as Mama gets home Monday through

> Thursday, she knows it has to be done and she knows if she doesn't have it done, because there have been days that she doesn't have it done, she's going to be in trouble. Something is going to be taken away or she is not going to watch TV for a week.

Mr. Hernandez added:

> Exactly! We are supposed to pick up where the teacher leaves off basically. A good portion of the child's life is at school. They can't think that they are learning everything at school so at home you can play and have fun. You have to come home and if you have chores to do, you have to do that first. It's kind of hard because I grew up in a family that had chores. Either you do your homework first, then your chores, or your chores first, or then your homework—then you have free time.

During Mrs. Santos interview, I asked her about her children's routine after school.

> She said:
>
> They come home and the first thing we do, we get settled in; we get our books out, our homework, everything out while I am giving them a snack. They have about 15 minutes to eat their snack and then they start on their homework. I don't answer any phones or watch any TV until their homework is done. I sit with them, if they need any help, I work with them. I read with them, whatever.

When I asked Mrs. Ramirez to describe a typical day when her children return from school, she stated:

> They have their snack, they watch TV, unwind themselves for a little bit and then it's time [for homework]. I want to say about 6:00 p.m., while I am cooking dinner, they are doing their homework. We then eat and then I check it. They know this is way we do things.

In addition to the routine set for completing their homework, each household had a systematic approach to developing life-long organizational skills. It is my perception that the participants seemed to hypothesize that with academic success, time, task management skills, and a sense of responsibility for the family and themselves, their children would acquire economic success and, ultimately, have a better life. Again, they noted their contributions and the role they played in the success of their children and dismissed the role of the school as a significant player in the molding of their children's future.

Ms. Vazquez said:

> At one point [Jimmy] was in karate, sports and school. And it's a lot. I know it's a lot to put on him but, I think in the future, you have to learn how to juggle a lot of things when you get older. You know you are working, you are going to school, you have a family, and then yourself. Just like I can show Jimmy that I can juggle being a mom, being a woman, being a daughter, being a parent. I think it's a good age to show him how to multi-task. You have to learn to do all of these things and get an education if you want to be successful and live a better life than the one we have right now.

In the Ramirez household, Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez detailed the routines for their family life and specified the chores that each child was expected to perform. Her eldest son was responsible for the finely trimmed lawn and her daughter helped with the general household chores. All of the children, including an eight-year-old son and three-year-old twin girls knew that they must all help around the house and keep their respective rooms tidy. She said, "I keep telling them to tidy up and keep it neat because nobody wants to do work and you don't do productive work in [a messy] environment like that."

Mrs. Ramirez added:

> If it's a bunch of clutter, then guess what, your work is going to be clutter. If it is nice and tidy, if it is nice and organized, your work will be nice and organized. They need to know that when they grow up they will have to manage many things if they want to get ahead.

Though I was only able to visit the Ramirez and the Vazquez homes, the orderliness of everything in the home seemed to be a priority. As I scoped the Ramirez and Vazquez households, everything seemed to have its place—much as a department store categorizes the merchandise—the household items were organized. The Ramirez home, though under construction with materials and tools strewn about, the furnishings were all in order—even the 3-year old twins' pink princess chairs were symmetrically aligned in front for the television. Nothing was ill-placed in the Vazquez home. Everything had a place and Jimmy knew exactly where things were located. He quickly retrieved a tape recorder when mine began to fail. I remember feeling a sense of incompetence at being able to keep my own home in such an orderly fashion.

The description each parent provided regarding how they disciplined their children further added to the voices of parents about the high expectations they had for them and their relentless quest to mold productive and economically successful children. Specifically, Mrs. Hernandez said, "There is that discipline so that [Amy] knows when she doesn't do what she is supposed to, she will have to do chores or give up TV or something like that." In her interview, Mrs. Ramirez said, "You're going to do this again; we're going to go to other means—like you're going to be grounded." Mrs. Santos, in her interview, said, "When my son gets into trouble, he gets chores until he does better." Whereas Ms. Vasquez said, "Jimmy, maybe, comes home with incomplete work or gets into trouble a little bit. I'll ground him. By grounding him I mean a week with no Nintendo or no Game Cube."

During Ms. Huizar's interview, she said:

> They get grounded. Like here in school, they give them the behavior folder and like if they have one or two markings, then they are grounded for one or two days. And they get their games taken away. They have their Game Boys and Game Cube and a Play Station 2, so if they get grounded or if for any reason they get into trouble, they get that taken away and they get grounded for a day. And not only they get grounded where they can't do anything, but we have a lot of books and we have Internet, of course, so we give them, [something] like, school worksheets and what not so they aren't wasting their time in there doing nothing.

The parents seemed to see it as their responsibility to set structures in place so that their children learned systematic ways about how to approach academic, personal and social obligations. The parents also seemed ready to accept the challenge of using their personal and cultural assets to teach their children the value of hard work. The aforementioned examples seemed to suggest that the parents were also interested in creating such structures for their children so they will continue a path to college and get a good job because they felt that the school personnel were not really interested in their futures.

Though the parents noted that they believed that school personnel devalued their parenting skills and thought that they lacked a commitment to high academic expectations and success for their children, they were not derailed by this thinking. All of the parents consistently repeated the aspirations they had for their children to attain the American dream and knew that the accomplishments of their children would be garnered as a result of their household assets and funds of knowledge.

The common theme resounding in all of the conversations with the participants concluded that given a good education, while maintaining conviction and persistence to realizing goals, their children would succeed. Moreover, all of the selected parents saw their role in their child's schooling process as their child's support system so that they could effectively negotiate the negative influences they perceived—though not necessarily in partnership with the school system.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the themes that emerged as a result of the analysis of the research. The two overarching themes are the (1) perception of the parents' role in the schooling process, and the (2) perception of the parents' experiences with their child's school. The first theme yielded two sub-themes—*parents as dream builders* and *parents as dream keepers*. The second theme yielded two sub-themes—*politics of involvement* and *the automatic deficit to default thinking*

The next and final chapter is a summary of the themes of this research study and the position of the themes in the literature. Chapter V of this study will place the themes in the context of findings, conclusions, suggestions for policy and practice and future research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter of this study concludes with an interpretation of the research findings and recommendations for policy, practice, and future study. Revealed in this study were two central themes with corresponding sub-themes. These themes included (1) the parents' perceptions of their role in the schooling process, and (2) the parents' perceptions of their experiences with their children's school. The first theme disclosed the parents' intense sense of responsibility to ensure their children's academic success. Indeed, they perceived themselves as responsible for helping their children build and keep their dreams. However, as theme two revealed, the jobs of dream builder and dream keeper posed difficult when working in a system, a school system, that privileged those parents who were able to or understood how to participate in parental involvement in traditional ways. Moreover, when the parents attempted to assimilate in what they believed were the "acceptable" ways of participating, they often felt marginalized and perceived as deficit or deficient. This notion of deficit thinking about Latino parents was interesting since the excuses most often discussed in the research as reasons why Latino parents fail to engage in the schooling of their children, such as the parents' inability to speak English, negative cultural experiences or lack of experience with the American school system, did not pertain to the parents in this study. Specifically, the second-and third-generation

Latino parents in this study speak English, understand the U.S. Latino culture and have had experiences with the school system as students.

What follows is a situating of this literature within the current research on parental involvement. Each theme will be addressed, beginning with the parents' perceptions of their role in the schooling process followed by the parents' perceptions of their experiences with their children's school. This chapter concludes with implications of the study and recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

The Research and Current Literature

The Parents' Perceptions of Their Role in the Schooling Process: *A Parent-School Relationship Misaligned*

The current discourse about the role of the school and the family as influential institutions in the development of children has moved from competing contexts in which the school works in isolation from the home to a more collaborative context in which school personnel and families work together for the healthy development of children (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, Ben-Avie, 1996; Epstein, 2001). However, after listening to the stories of the Latino parents in this study, I find a disconnect between the definition and understanding of parental involvement as articulated by school staff and the definition and understanding of parental involvement from these Latino parents' perspectives. This difference in definition and understanding although not addressed in the work of Comer et al (1996) and Epstein (2001), is posited by Lopez

(2001). In fact, the way that the parents think the school personnel view parent involvement and the parents' view of parent involvement in the schooling process are at opposite ends of the spectrum and collaboration is not a word that surfaces to the forefront of these conclusions. For the most part, the parents in this study define parent involvement in the context of what they can control and not in relation to or in collaboration with the school. They define parent involvement as their presence in their child's life as nurturers and motivators—*dream builders* and as advocates—*dream keepers*.

This notion of presence is addressed in the work of Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) when studying three working-class immigrant parents. As in my research, Pérez Carreón et al. discovered the importance of the parent's presence in their child's life, but not necessarily in the traditional ways defined by schools.

Specifically, they suggest that,

> Parent involvement needs to be understood through parents' *presence* in their children's schooling, regardless of whether that presence is in a formal school space or in a more personal, informal space, including spaces created by parents themselves. (Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005, p. 466)

In the aforementioned study, the researchers demonstrated the ways in which they found parents engage in the education of their children. They further discussed how each parent draws upon different resources available to them to stay involved in the schooling process by "constructing relationships with school actors" (Pérez Carreón, Drake & Calabrese Barton, 2005, p. 494).Moreover, they posit that in establishing their presence through the construction of relationships with the school personnel, it increases "their [parents] knowledge of the school cultural world and their ability to have a significant influence on it" (Pérez Carreón, Drake & Calabrese Barton, 2005, p. 494). In other words, the parents in the Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) study see themselves in the context of the school, partly because they equate their involvement in the school's parent involvement structures as a necessary part of their child's success in the American school system.

Much in the same way that Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) discussed the importance of the parents' presence in the children's schooling, whether formally taking place in a school setting or not, I also found that the Latino parents in this study saw their presence in their child's life as important. However, they more closely defined their *presence* when they purposefully engaged with their children, so that, through personal teachings, their children developed as emotionally, socially and morally healthy children. They did not see their presence in anyway connected to the school or school activities. They also equated their presence in the everyday life of their child as good parenting ensuring their children are *bien educados* [well-educated] and academically successful. Further, the parents in this study revealed a new and different dimension of *presence.* They suggested that their presence in their child's life is necessary in order to protect their children from the negative influences of the school.

Specifically, the Latino parents in this study believed that the teachers' prejudices and biases about their children and them are contra productive in helping their children realize their goals of achieving high academic grades, completing college, and attaining a good job with good wages, which the parents describe as attaining the

American Dream of wealth and prosperity. And as such, the parents worked diligently as their children's advocates or dream keepers to ensure that the school's perceived negative influences did not block the road to their children's dreams.

Unlike the parents in the Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) study, who drew upon resources to help them negotiate the school cultural world, the parents in this study rejected the need to negotiate the school culture because of their lived negative experiences with school personnel. The parents also rejected opportunities to involve themselves in the formal and sanctioned activities of the school because they believed that many of the teachers consider them [parents] inferior and possessing limited parenting skills. The parents expressed an unwillingness to subject themselves to the dominance of the school personnel. Further, the parents in this study were unwilling to engage in the *politics of involvement* and rebuffed any attempts by the school personnel to make them conform to the traditional ways of involving themselves in the child's schooling process. As a result of their "failed" participation in the sanctioned activities of the school, they were cast to a lower status level than those parents who spent hours in direct service to the school. As such, the parents seemed to feel that their relationship with the teachers was misaligned and rendered their children and them powerless and vulnerable to unfair treatment and possible failure.

The Parents' Perceptions of Their Experiences with Their Children's School: The School's Farce and the Parents' Reality

As the parents discussed the expectations they have of the school and, conversely, the expectations they perceived the school personnel had of them, they were critical. The parents' critical comments centered on the school personnel's everyday efforts to engage them. They specifically cited the pointlessness of sending untimely informational notes home in their children's backpacks. In addition, they noted the impracticality of conducting parent meetings or scheduling parent conferences during the day while the parents are engaged in other familial obligations or at work. Many of the parents are hourly wage-earners who work in an atmosphere that does not allow them to leave work to attend a parent conference or a parent meeting. This seemed to the parents to be a total disregard for the parents' schedule. They also point to the hollowness of the teachers' efforts to communicate; leaving telephone messages inviting parents to discuss important information, yet leaving a telephone number that is not answered after school hours. Further, they noted the futility of the school system's efforts to engage them in the decision-making process by convening community meetings about formidable topics during the peak dinner hour.

However ineffectual, the aforementioned school actions are consistent with traditional notions of school system's construction of how they are supposed to engage parents in a meaningful partnership. As such, what the school staff understands as acceptable and what the parents understand as effective and authentic are contradictory (Lopez, 2001, Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999). As a result of the incongruence in the understanding of what constitutes effective parent engagement, parents in this study perceived the school staff's efforts at involving them as shallow and perfunctory, done more so to comply with the political correctness than in an effort to actually engage them as meaningful partners. Further, the parents' perception of the school personnel's lack of attention to the reality of their daily routines indicated a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of the parents or a farcical attempt at parental involvement.

In addition to the parents' perceptions that the teachers grossly failed in their attempts to effectively engage them in school-family partnerships, there was a significant disdain for and even mistrust of school personnel's intentions toward their children. The parents' perceived that the teachers had low expectations for the academic success of their children and failed in their obligation as teachers to lift students up and expect excellence (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). This contempt was exacerbated because the parents also perceived that the teachers accepted the accolades for their children's academic successes, all the while dismissing the efforts of the parents in the success. Further, the parents believed that the teachers held them completely and solely responsible for their children's actions when something goes wrong; an abrogation on the part of the teachers to accept responsibility for any missteps and a deliberate blaming of the parents (Finders & Lewis, 2005).

The perceptions of the parents in this study are consistent with the literature (Finders & Lewis, 2005; Valencia, 2005; Valencia & Black, 2002) that discusses the daily struggle of thousands of parents and children of color with teachers and administrators who attribute the lack of school success on the students' and parents' race, backgrounds, culture, or disregard for education. Such thinking stems from an institutional perspective that children and their families should possess certain desirable attributes. When children or their families do not possess those attributes desirable to the institution, it is that lack of attributes that causes the student's academic failure or poor behavior—deficit thinking (Valencia, 2005; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Within the context of this study, deficit thinking is well documented in the stories of the parents and children. Specifically, the parents in this study perceived their children's teachers as having lower expectations for their children's' academic performance. However, instead of accepting a predestined fate of failure that tends to befall children of color and poverty, the parents in this study are working diligently to ensure their children's academic and social success. They described the high expectations they have for their children's academic performance and ultimate success; evident are the routines and systems they have in their households. Many of the parents, drawing from their font of knowledge describe the systematic ways in which they operate their households—the routines for rising from bed, getting dressed, getting to school on time, coming home from school, playing, completing and checking homework, and preparing for the next day. They described the consistency of their discipline techniques aimed at ensuring the moral and spiritual development of their children. In addition, they described the ways in which they teach their children to take responsibility for their actions, to learn self-discipline, and to work in the household as a contributing member—each child is assigned household chores depending on age and abilities, understands the expectations of their parents regarding homework and discipline, and is proud to help around the house. In order to provide their children with opportunities for well-rounded development and because they perceived that the school lacks extra-curricular programming, each parent described the variety of extra-curricular activities in which they involved their children (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004).

General Implications

Changing Lens: Seeing Assets

The participants' sentiments expressed above tell a story, from the parents' reality. They clearly articulate how it is their perception that the school personnel's efforts to engage them in the schooling process are meaningless and rooted in a tendency toward deficit thinking about them and their children. More pointedly, the parents in this study, unlike the parents in the studies of Delgado-Gaitán (1992), Lopez (1999), Pérez Carreón et al., (2005), and Scribner et al., (1999), are all U.S.-born, speak English, understand the U.S. culture, and attended school in a U.S. public school system and, therefore, do not have the same barriers often cited by researchers for the Latino parents' perceived lack of involvement in their child's schooling, yet they were treated by the school personnel as deficient in some way. To avoid a tendency toward deficit thinking, Moll et al. (1992) suggests that school personnel realize the inherent strengths and value of the children and families with whom they engage. Further, school personnel must re-envision the teacher-student relationship so that the teacher can build on those inherent strengths and values to serve the student. Moll et al. (1992) also suggest that the new vision for the changed relationship between student and teacher requires a willingness to take the time to learn more about the lives of individual students outside of school and celebrating their uniqueness. Through the approach—funds of knowledge, which refers "to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for households or individual functioning and well-being," Moll et al. (p. 133) suggest that teachers take the time to go out into the community and find the funds of knowledge the people collectively possess. Understanding the funds of knowledge of the culturally diverse family leads to a greater possibility of an effective relationship between the parent and the teacher and subsequently, leads to greater academic success (Moll et al., 1992).

Ladson-Billings (1994) adds that teachers must understand the importance of the family's culture and suggests that building on the assets of the culture will enhance the academic performance of culturally diverse students. Specifically, in Ladson-Billings' (1994) book, she discuss the concept of *culturally relevant pedagogy* and defines culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. In her academic work, Ladson-Billings (1994) posits that those teachers who invest in the context of the children's lives and who understand the culture that motivates their actions which, at times, are unexplainable to the culturally-deficient personnel in schools, have greater success with students' academic performance. Further, the culturally relevant teacher recognizes families as sources of knowledge, regularly communicates high expectations for the academic success of the students, and centers student learning squarely within the context of culture. The Latino parents in this study, however, noted the lack of the school personnel's appreciation of their culture. Instead of teaching through culturally relevant materials and practices, they cited the disparaging remarks and stereotypical comments made my school personnel about Latinos.

Changing Lens: Being Seen

The current embedded parent involvement structures and efforts have widened the chasm in the already weak parent-school relationship. Paradoxically, the parents in this study felt that the teachers dismissed and devalued their contributions to their children's successes and fervently declared that their negative experiences caused them to reject the notion of participating in the privileged activities of the school. In spite of the parents' dismissal by the school personnel, they genuinely seemed to want to have a relationship with their child's teacher and be a part of the school culture. They wanted to be seen; they wanted to be connected. This need for intimacy with the school personnel is consistent with the experiences of the parents in the Perez Carreon et al. (2005) study. Though they, too, experienced negative interactions with school personnel, they continued in their attempts to construct relationships with the school personnel in an effort to support their children's education.

In the study I conducted, , the parents consistently stated that they do not see their role in the schooling of their children in connection or partnership with the school, however, our conversations lead me to believe that what they wanted most is for the school personnel to really see them, to know them—*a need for intimacy*. They wanted the teachers to know that they are parents who care about their children, who possess effective parenting skills and who sincerely wanted their children to be academically and socially successful (Delgado Gaitán, 2004; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Further, they wanted the teachers to recognize and understand the personal circumstances that prevented them from participating in the privileged activities of the school.

The Latino parents in this study also presented compelling arguments about how to strengthen the current relationship with school personnel. They suggested that the teachers engage them in outreach and communication activities that are comfortable for them, such as visiting them in their homes, conversing with them after school hours, and connecting with them on a respectful, personal and blame-free level (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004). Mrs. Ramirez perhaps summed up the sentiments best with a single word when she stated that there currently exists a *disconnect* between the parent and the teacher. She continues by saying, "It's a relationship thing. It's a communication thing and they just don't get it."

Ms. Vazquez also expresses a need for the teachers to know her on a more personal level.

She said:

> They need to get to know me—like a person. I am a person who is working hard to give my son all that I have so that he can do well. I might be poor and live on the poor side of town, but I am a good person and I know my son will grow up to be a good person, too. Jimmy spends most of his day at school. He also stays for the after school program, so he is there most of the time. When he comes home, we don't have much time together with homework and everything, but I take time to find out how his day went. I don't want to hear that he had a bad day because of something that he can't control [economic situation or divorced parents]. It hurts me to know that [school personnel] might make a comment like that. I wish they would come and see, like you, that I am okay and that he is going to make it—mostly because of me, my mom and my sister.

Ms. Huizar also wishes she had more communication with her child's teacher and offers that the school should mail important information to the home to ensure that it is received in a timely manner. The same sentiments are echoed by the other parents as they, too, suggest that teachers send home letters detailing all that is going on in the classroom. They added that a more intimate way of communicating with them about their children's academic progress would help their children perform even better.

What resounds most profoundly is the parents' need for their children's teachers to come to know them in new and distinct ways. This new knowledge will allow the teachers to see the households of their students as possessing rich cultural and cognitive resources, which, in turn, provide for more meaningful lessons and relationships (Moll, 1992; Noguera, 2004).

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Scholars and practitioners, primarily over the last two decades, have designed research studies aimed at identifying those efforts by policy makers and school personnel that contribute to the academic success of students in order to reform the schooling process; all in the hope of raising the academic achievement levels of students of color. Borrowing from community building efforts and the democratic principle that the involvement of the constituencies yields a greater investment and interest of the party in the success of the project or activity, parent involvement squarely fits as a significant reform effort with which to contend.

Efforts aimed at involving the constituency in order to effectuate change in the schooling process, however, have become complicated with the influx of students who are changing the complexion of our classrooms. This section offers implications and recommendations for policy and practice in the areas of effective parental engagement and cultural awareness and critical reflection that compels educators to investigate further the relationship between parents and school personnel in order to harness the best practices that afford a quality education to all children.

Moreover, this section adds to the research conducted by other Latino researchers regarding incongruence in the definition of what constitutes parent involvement and reinforces efforts to debunk the notion that parents, specifically Latino parents, who do not participate in the privileged activities as constructed by school personnel, do not care about their children. More pointedly, it is my hope that my story of the perceptions of the Latino participants will add to the voices of other Latino researchers who interrogate the current nature of parent involvement programs throughout school systems so as to jolt policy makers and school personnel into a new reality of what constitutes parental engagement. Lastly, it is also my hope that the interrogation of current parent involvement practices leads to the re-examination of not only the school programs, but also reverses the school personnel's automatic default to deficit thinking about the families they purportedly serve. Until school personnel fully understand the many dimensions of parent involvement and the assets of Latino families, a meaningful and lastly relationship between the home and the school focused on ensuring the academic success of U.S.-born Latino students will remain illusive.

Policy: Parent Involvement Aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act (2000)

In a profound manner, the mandates of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to measure the performance of various student subgroups elucidate the gap in the academic performance of children of color when compared to their white counterparts. The illumination of this fact compels policy makers and educators to deconstruct the current parent involvement systems sanctioned and supported by public school systems and reinvent the systems to ensure strong parent-school relationships.

Inasmuch as the policy makers recognize the influence of the parent on the academic success of students, both the reauthorization of the federal entitlements to school districts aimed at addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged students and the NCLB amply describe the actions necessary to ensure the academic success of the child, but are deficient in articulating the specific ways in which parents and schools can work together in the context of the parent's reality and their culture. The policies suggest a joint teaching of the student by school personnel and parents, however, this compact seems no more than political rhetoric to the Latino parents whose lived experiences indicate illegitimacy of intentions for the joint care of their child's academic future.

The very policies targeted to address the specific needs of children and their parents woefully ignore the reality needs of parents and children of many urban school systems. Instead, the parent involvement efforts are left to be constructed by the school personnel who woefully ignore the parents' reality for participation, the assets of the family and their culture. Most of the efforts defined by the school as described by the parents confirm their notion that, in order for them to be involved in the education of their children, they had to be in direct service to the school and engaged in activities privileged by the school. The current efforts fail to acknowledge alternative ways in which parents support their children and are involved in the schooling process. Calling attention to a school system's failure to engage the parents as meaningful partners in the schooling process must drive the next conversations about school success and lead to a reformation of policies about effective parent engagement.

Moreover, authentic relationship-building efforts that connect the home and the school must move to the forefront of school and district planning actions and must be recreated in a context that is meaningful for parents. Through home visits, small group meetings, *house* meetings, personal *platícas* or conversations, book studies, parent-led share and exchange sessions, and action research, we can achieve a better understanding of practices that will ensure the academic performance of Latino students in cooperation with their parents.

For final consideration by policy makers, though perhaps of most importance, is the need for school personnel to shed the deficit models of thinking about Latino families and their children that seem to dominate the conversations in the school house and that bear out in this study. Therefore, policies directing school personnel to develop an understanding of the assets of the home—the funds of knowledge that Latino families possess, by mandating school systems to implement culturally relevant curriculum and set quality standards for effective parent engagement Anything less will negate efforts to provide equitable and excellent schools for all children.

Practice: Professional Development for Teachers and Administrators

The aforementioned implications and recommendations for shifts in policy development, adoption, and implementation, oblige us to review the current policies and practices for the preparation of teachers and administrators and to re-evaluate the nature of current professional development practices for those school personnel already in service to our students. Clearly, the demographic shifts and changing complexions of our classrooms herald a reality on which teachers and administrators must focus—a rethinking of their pedagogical practices with an emphasis on a culturally diverse student population.

Universities and school districts must help pre-service and in-service teachers to understand the cultural, linguistic, and socio-political backgrounds of the students they are preparing to teach and those they teach and examine the important issues of how race, culture, ethnicity, and social class influence student learning if effective student learning is to take place. Moreover, educational professionals must understand that the cultural capital of racially diverse students is often quite different from the mainstream norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973), and if teachers are to be effective, there must be a bridging of the gap in understanding the differences and, moreover, the significance of those differences in the education of the diverse student. School personnel must be able to understand the cultural capital of the students and build on the assets of the culture and the family to maximize the educational benefit to the students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973).

As such, when school district's create professional development sessions for teachers' and administrators' professional repertoire, they must include the teaching of culturally relevant pedagogical practices and recognize those practices as valuable methods of meeting the academic and social needs of the students who are sitting in urban classrooms today (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Further, if teachers, specifically, the predominantly homogeneously teaching populations in classrooms today, are to penetrate and disrupt the current failure rate of the heterogeneous student population currently enrolled in urban schools, they must be able to reflect critically on their instructional practices. As such, universities and school districts must train all of those individuals who engage with students, to reframe the conversations of teachers and administrators in such a way as to force the self-reflection of their understanding and biases about culture and how the cultural context influences the practice of teaching. In addition, the conversations among educators about the relevance of culturally focused pedagogy and the influences of culturally relevant practices must be deliberate and honest. Through a purposeful examination, a critical self-knowledge of our inner selves (Palmer, 1998), as teachers, we can develop a powerful method for teachers and administrators to build on their own strengths and shed the misconceptions held by educators of students from diverse populations. There must be a loud call to know ourselves in order to better teach (Palmer, 1998).

Palmer (1998) wrote,

> Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less that the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self knowledge—and knowing my students and my subject…In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self –knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my own unexamined life—and teach when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach well. (p. 2)

As Palmer posited, in knowing oneself, a teacher who engages in critical self-reflection can better teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds because there is a better understanding of their own psychology. As such, if a teacher has a tendency toward deficit-based constructs of culturally diverse students, the constructs can be acknowledged and filtered. Palmer (1998) further suggests that in building a culturally relevant pedagogical framework from which teachers can frame their teaching practices, the underachievement of students from culturally different backgrounds may reverse.

Drawing from Palmer's position that we must know ourselves in order to effectively teach culturally diverse students, and extending his notion that in knowing ourselves, we begin to know our students, I suggest that effective teaching does not stop there. In this study and through the voices of parents, I posit that the knowing of students in order to better teach them extends to knowing the family. How can a teacher come to know a student, their cultural behaviors and thoughts, without coming to know the families?

The manner, in which teachers treat the students, as evidenced in the conversations with the parents in this study, surely affects the perceptions the parents have of the teachers, the school, and the schooling process. Thus, the process through which a teacher begins to understand the culture of a student and subsequently teach effectively should begin with a critical self-reflection. Their development should progress to understanding those thoughts or biases they have so they can work outside of themselves to shed any deficit thinking about the students. In addition, it is necessary to extend the understanding of the students to the students' family because anything less would impede a richer and deeper knowing of the cultural behavior and thoughts of the students. Without acknowledging the context of family and role that the family plays in the students' lives, is to miss the fundamental understanding of culture.

Practice: Professional Development for Parents

The literature is replete with studies that suggest that the key component of effective parent involvement is the engagement of parents in training sessions sponsored by school personnel (Epstein, 2001). As documented in research, there exists the assumption that parents, especially parents of color, are deficient in some way and need assistance from school personnel to be better parents so that they can support their children's education. The underlying goal of these training sessions is to somehow inform parents and make them conform to the school personnel's idea of how they should be involved in the schooling process and in the activities deemed privileged by the school personnel.

I suggest that the current model or framework of parent involvement programs, primarily those created in a white, middle-class context, are not relevant to parents of color, especially those in an urban high-poverty school setting. Inasmuch as this is the assumption, I suggest a restructuring of the ways in which school personnel have typically attempted to develop meaningful parent relationships.

The reconstruction of the Latino parent and school relationship should be based on a fundamental understanding of the assets of a family and constructed around those activities that are mutually beneficial to both the parent and the school and that take into consideration the reality of urban families' daily lives.

There is a place for parent information and learning sessions in our schools today, but the learning should be two-way. Teachers and other school personnel must learn about the culture of Latino families and parents must understand the educational process and how they can assist in ensuring the academic success of their children to maximize their contributions. Through personal contact and home visits aimed at getting to know the family (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), a new construction of parent involvement can be formed.

Future Research

I began this study with the intention of exploring how second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents perceive parent involvement and, more specifically, how they understand their role in the education of their children. I was compelled to understand why teachers lamented the lack of parent involvement but all the while seemed complacent in accepting the status quo. What I discovered, though it is not my intention to generalize, is a rooted incongruence or disconnect in role construction. As expressed through the voices of parents, the way in which they think they should be involved in the education of their children and the way in which school personnel want them to be involved in the schooling process are completely contradictory. Moreover, I discovered that this disconnect may stem from the school personnel's basic misconception about and a valuing of the contributions of the Latino parents and an ignorance of the Latino culture. For example, drawing from the Latino parents' understanding of education or *educación,* which emphasizes the socialization and behavior of their children rather than on the formal acquisition of factual knowledge, the school personnel are at a disadvantage to understand the importance that the Latino family places “on good manners, respect for parents and seniors, loyalty to one’s family, courage in the face of adversity, self-respect and a highly honed sense of dignity” (Lafayette De Mente, 1996).

From this researcher’s perspective, the confusion about what constitutes parent involvement by U.S.-born Latino parents also stems from a perceived failure on the part of school personnel to recognize the cultural capital and richness of the culturally diverse household. The perceived misunderstanding about the assets of such households, coupled with a failure to critically reflect about the intricate differences of culture and race of their students, limits the teacher’s ability to effectively teach students of color and renders them trapped in engaging practices that automatically default to a deficit mode of thinking about students and families of color. This mode of thinking by school personnel, coupled with their apparent abrogation of responsibility for any problem a student may experience and a total failure to acknowledge to positive influences of the parent regarding the successes of a student, squarely add to my supposition that the chasm in parent-school relationships must be bridged if students of color are to achieve academic success.

Further study of the role of race, class, and gender in the American classroom would add to the literature about the U.S.-born Latino parents’ role in the education of their children. Though some studies of this nature have been conducted, most have focused on the immigrant family’s story and have not interrogated the stories of those second- and third- generation U.S.-born parents, whose children dominate many classrooms in many southern states, such as Texas. Moreover, the voices of Latino parents who themselves have experienced the public school systems and who would serve as rich sources of information to understand their marginalization and how their lived experiences contribute to their role in the education of their children, are also limited in the current literature and are warranted. Further, through research studies aimed at uncovering these stories, we can gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between cultural relevance, critical pedagogy, and critical reflection and the academic success of students of color. Though this study is qualitative, a quantitative approach would also provide rich information about this topic.

Conclusion

Attaining a good education is often described as the fundamental cornerstone necessary to attaining success—the American Dream. The test of our nation's fundamental principle, however, rests in the schooling we afford all of our students. In expanding the opportunity for the success of students of color, educators must understand their students' learning processes, teach through culturally relevant curriculum and recognize the value of developing a relationship with the child and their family.

In order to meet the needs of our culturally diverse student populations in our classrooms, school-sponsored parent involvement activities and programs must recognize the alternate ways in which families engage themselves in the schooling process. Beyond the recognition of the variance in the U. S.-born Latino families' construction of parent involvement is the need for school personnel to honor those differences and tailor engagement practices so that meaningful relationships are formed to ensure the academic success of Latino children. Anything less is to accept the status quo of school systems' blindness of the assets of Latino families.

ENDNOTES

[1] I use the terms parents and parent involvement throughout this study. I do, however, recognize that other adults—grandparents, aunts, uncles, guardians, siblings, and other relatives—may carry the primary responsibility for the child's education and welfare. Therefore, all references to parents and parent involvement are meant to include all adults who play an important role in a child's home life.

[2] The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably in this study.

[3] Amistad School District is a pseudonym for the school district in which this study took place.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Initial Interview

Tell me a little about yourself.

Where were you born?

Where did you go to school?

How many children do you have?

Where do they go to school?

What grades are they in?

What do you think is the definition of parent involvement?

Have you been involved in school activities?

Tell me about some of your experiences.

What was the activity?

How were you involved?

How did you feel about this experience?

How do you think your child reacted to your involvement?

How do you think the teachers reacted?

Would you participate in that activity again? If so, why or why not?

Tell me about another experience.

What are other ways in which you are involved, as a parent, in your child's education?

What do you think is more valuable to your child?

What do you think your child would say?

How is your involvement different from your parents' involvement in your education?

What do you think would be the ideal relationship between the school and the home?

What do you think the school should do to include parents in the education of their children?

Would you do anything differently?

Why do you think that your child is doing well in school?

What role do you think you play in that?

What role do you think that the school plays in that?

Do you have any questions for me?

Follow up Interview Questions

I want to talk a little more about how you think the school sees you—What do you think they [the school personnel] think about you as a parent?

What makes you say that?

Do you think that school personnel would rather deal with you as a parent or not?

Do you see that you are a partner in your child's education with the school?

Do you think the school personnel think that you should be a partner?

What should that look like?

Have you had an experience with the school personnel that you would consider to be unpleasant?

How did it make you feel?

Did that event affect the way you work with the school?

Why do you continue to work with your child?

How did you get to be a *good parent*? Let's really talk about this----

What does it mean to be a *good parent*?

What do you think the school thinks is a *good parent*?

Give me some examples.

Do you think that all parents are treated equally by school personnel? Explain.

Let's talk a little about the systems you have set up in your home to help your child—

Who was your role model?

Why? What characteristics in them did you or do you admire?

What do you want the school personnel to know about you as a parent?

How do you think they [school personnel] should accomplish this?

Why do you think it is important for them [school personnel] to know about you or to know you?

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The typist for this dissertation was Mr. Bill A. Ashworth, Jr.