

# ***Entre Familia: Immigrant Parents' Strategies for Involvement in Children's Schooling***

*Luis Poza, Maneka Deanna Brooks, and Guadalupe Valdés*

## **Abstract**

Teachers and administrators in schools with large, working-class Latino populations often complain of parents' indifference or lack of involvement in children's schooling because of their low visibility at school events and relatively little face-to-face communication with teachers and school administration. In a series of semi-structured interviews with Latino immigrant parents, this study finds that, despite different educational experiences than those of their children in the United States, these parents engage in many of the parent involvement strategies observed by previous research to be most beneficial, though often through avenues bypassing the school itself. This finding presses schools and districts to recognize both the ways in which immigrant parents actually do the many things for which they never receive credit and the value of the other forms of involvement in which parents are active. We classify these reported behaviors into categories of **asking questions** about school and school processes, **attending** events at school or outside of school that parents deem supportive of children's learning, and **altering/augmenting** children's educational trajectories to improve outcomes. The study also reports on obstacles that interviewed parents faced in their efforts to interact with schools in conventional ways.

Key Words: Latino immigrants, parents, family, involvement, schools, learning, obstacles, communication, immigrating, education, schooling

## Introduction

A popular lament among teachers and administrators in schools with many Latino students is a lack of parent involvement, based on a narrow definition of the term. Justification for these claims is offered in the form of relatively low parent attendance at conferences or meetings, parents' deference to teachers on academic matters, relative scarcity of books in the home, and divergent practices from those of the classroom with respect to literacy (Olivos, 2006; Olivos, Jiménez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011). At their most well-intentioned, these arguments cite cultural differences and divergences between parents' own schooling experiences and those expected by U.S. schools and suggest that schools take action to remedy this "mismatch" by acculturating parents to the school's expectations. At their most insidious, however, these claims exemplify and reproduce deficit philosophies that not only attribute different experiences to parents, but also propagate beliefs about parent apathy and dismissive attitudes towards children's education, as well as assumptions about parents' lacking education and literacy. Despite such characterizations of Latino immigrant parents, this study finds among those interviewed numerous alignments with the parent involvement strategies that prior research (e.g., Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007) describes as most beneficial. Specifically, we have identified three particular behaviors that immigrant parents undertake: asking questions about schooling and education, altering or augmenting children's schooling experience, and attending events related to children's education, albeit often through organizations and social networks outside the school—thus not receiving recognition from teachers or administrators for their efforts. While this does not negate the presence of less beneficial strategies, it relocates the locus of responsibility on schools and districts to first and foremost recognize the ways in which immigrant parents actually do the many things for which they never receive credit and, secondly, to recognize value in the other forms of involvement in which parents are active beyond the narrow expectations laid out by some teachers (e.g., see Lareau, 2000) and the ways in which schools and society inadvertently deter the very involvement they seek.

### Review of Prior Research

Our analysis of parent involvement first requires defining the term, given that many scholars and organizations use this phrase differently. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) offer a useful understanding of the concept by stating, "Parent involvement, in our framework, is the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain. Such a definition recognizes that there is a difference between parents' overall involvement with the child and the child's

education” (p. 238). The authors then distinguish the educational domain from others in which parents may allocate time or materials for their children, such as social activities and athletics. For the parents in our study, however, the educational domain is not as easily isolated from others such as family, religion, and social activities. Despite this difference, the operating definition of parent involvement as an investment of resources towards an educational goal is instrumental for our present analysis.

Drawing on this definition of parent involvement, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) distinguish three dimensions of involvement: behavioral, personal, and cognitive/intellectual. Behavioral involvement consists of parents manifesting their involvement through attendance and participation in school events such as open houses and PTA meetings. Personal involvement refers to the affective experience of children understanding that their parent(s) care about school, for example, as a result of conversations around schooling and education which instill a positive feeling toward school. The cognitive/intellectual dimension consists of exposing children to cognitively stimulating materials and experiences, such as books and visits to libraries, academic summer camps, or museums. In similar fashion, Epstein (2001) provides an oft-cited framework that outlines six distinct forms of parent involvement, summarized in Table 1. Working with these six types, Epstein offers examples of programmatic implementation of different elements and the subsequent results. She notes that schools must choose particular types of involvement best suited to meet parents' and students' needs and provides helpful suggestions for schools to foster parent involvement accordingly.

Table 1. Parent Involvement Behaviors (Epstein, 2001)

Type	Description
Parenting	Child-rearing skills and establishing home conditions that support children as students
Communicating	Bidirectional communication between schools and families regarding school programs and student progress
Volunteering	Parents serve as volunteers, audiences, or assistants in schools or other locations in support of students and school programs
Learning at home	Homework and other learning activities in the home linked to formal school curriculum
Decision making	Parents participate as advocates or in school governance and decision-making through formal channels such as school councils or parent organizations
Collaborating with the community	School provides service to the community and coordinates resources and services for families, students, and schools themselves with community organizations and businesses

Beyond types of parent involvement itself, Pomerantz et al. (2007) note that the manner in which parents participate and their reasons for doing so are also influential in children's schooling. The authors distinguish between involvement that takes place at school and in the home as well as the mechanisms by which such involvement helps children. The authors argue that parent involvement fosters skill development—the refinement of abilities directly related to school such as phonological awareness and metacognitive abilities such as planning and monitoring—as well as motivational development, which refers to children's engagement in school and is reflected in positive attitudes towards school and academic achievement or a sense of control in academic performance, for instance. The extent to which these mechanisms, skill development or motivational development, show effect relates to the motivations and manners of parent involvement.

Exploring the characteristics of parent involvement behaviors, Pomerantz et al. (2007) establish four principal dimensions of difference. First, they distinguish between controlling and autonomy-supportive styles. Controlling involves parents pressuring children towards particular outcomes, while autonomy-supportive consists of children freely exploring their own environment and solving their own problems. Pomerantz et al., citing extensive prior research, note that autonomy-supportive styles enhance motivational development as children's sense of competency and self-efficacy are enriched by successful problem-solving. A second distinction the authors delineate is between process-focused and person-focused involvement. Process-focused involvement stresses the importance of pleasure and effort in learning, whereas a person-focused approach emphasizes supposedly stable attributes such as intelligence (but see Dweck, 2006, for evidence that intelligence is itself malleable), or outcomes, such as performance on a task. The authors thirdly distinguish parent involvement characterized by positive or negative affect. In this condition, parents' interactions with children regarding education are either enjoyable, loving, and supportive, or marked by irritation, annoyance, hostility, or criticism. Finally, the authors outline parent involvement differentiated by parents' positive or negative beliefs about children's abilities. They find that optimizing the benefits of parent involvement relies on participation that is autonomy-supportive, process-focused, and marked with positive affect and positive beliefs about student's abilities. Pomerantz et al.'s findings are based on their own extensive research, albeit mostly with European American families, and a thorough review of literature in each of the four delineations. While such comprehensive analysis offers valuable considerations for the many forms and approaches of parent involvement, it still implicitly frames parent involvement as a set of prescribed behaviors and activities in which parents do

or do not engage, whether at the school or in the home, and whether because of intrinsic attitudes and beliefs or extrinsic impediments.

In perhaps the most thorough review of the recent literature, Ferguson (2008) considers 31 studies selected for their sound methodology, strong theoretical grounding, and consideration of diverse communities and contexts, and divides the selected research into six principal areas of inquiry. The first set of studies analyzes the sense of welcome that schools create to invite families to interact with staff. Within this sphere, studies note parent characteristics that facilitate or present barriers to interaction such as their own education levels and experiences, beliefs about children's abilities, the school's or children's overt invitations, and language differences. Ferguson's second category of parent involvement research explores resource allocation with respect to family participation, taking into account resources put forth by schools as well as by families or community organizations. Such work typically considers the investment of resources toward school outreach, training of stakeholders and leaders toward fostering mutual understanding, and procedures to solicit family and community input. Another aspect distinguished in the review is research around program structure. Specifically, these studies explore policies, procedures, and patterns of resource use that encourage family participation.

The other three categories that Ferguson's 2008 review notes are likely the source of most deficit thinking with regard to Latino immigrant families and are therefore of particular concern for the present study. One facet of the recent literature explores stakeholders' misconceptions about one another with regard to family-school interactions, noting that "misconception links to mistrust" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 11). In these studies, researchers consider factors such as racial bias, lack of staff preparation to address stereotypes and other such misconceptions, or erroneous beliefs that families and schools have about each other's motivations and practices. The review also distinguishes studies investigating the role of those involved in school-family connections which inquire into how the beliefs, prior experiences, perceived abilities, and knowledge which families rely upon shape the opportunities they create and act upon toward schools. Finally, Ferguson's review categorizes together those studies that explore the home context and student performance, specifically inquiring as to the effect of particular home cultures, parenting practices, home crises, or significant events on student achievement. Needless to say, from these three categories of research emerges a picture of a wide gulf between schools and immigrant Latino families that must be bridged through some combination of enhancing school personnel's understanding of the cultural practices and parenting styles in which families engage and training parents to adopt particular behaviors or beliefs in line with those of the school. Such a portrayal is overly

simplistic and does not account for the dynamic nature of culture (Duranti, 1997; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and, moreover, leaves room for interpretation into deficit-based assumptions, even when these are not intrinsic to the research itself.

A more critical perspective recognizes and values the means by which Latino immigrant families participate in children's education while acknowledging the obstacles they face in connecting with school and other such institutions in their recipient communities. Literature in this vein is certainly established as well. In frequently cited publications, Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) and Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) report working with classroom teachers to help them conduct ethnographic research of the home life of their students and students' families. As collaborators in the research and through careful qualitative data collection, teachers and researchers alike recognize numerous fields of experience and strengths within households that they term "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). These funds of knowledge not only help families successfully navigate migration and day-to-day living, but also serve as a powerful addition to classroom practice when students' lives and their families' experiences are incorporated into lessons. Similarly, Valdés (1996) conducts thorough ethnographic research with recently immigrated families and finds that they often rely on a "collective wisdom" (Valdés, 1996, p. 94) consisting of the shared knowledge acquired by relatives and others in the social network in the recipient society to navigate institutions and the challenges of new experiences and contexts. Furthermore, Valdés observes that teaching in the home of, for instance, household tasks like washing dishes, relies less on parents instructing children explicitly and more on children's cumulative learning through attempts at the task and observation of older siblings or relatives, a highly constructivist approach that differs with how schools often teach children or expect parents to support schooling in the home. Villegas and Lucas (2002) build on the lessons of such ethnographic work in Latino communities by proposing direct applications into teacher training. They argue that some level of anthropological training for teachers will help them develop a better understanding of the nature of culture, precluding assumptions of homogeneity in parenting styles or certain deficit perspectives as teachers gain a better understanding of the communities in which students and their parents live. Olivos (2006) and Olivos et al. (2011) suggest a more dialogic relationship between parents and schools. The authors envision a model of parent involvement that they label the "Transformative Education Context Model" (Olivos, 2006, p. 110), in which "parent involvement is seen as a process of transformation in which social literacy and critical consciousness is achieved by all the participants for the benefit of student literacy, academic achievement, and

school and social transformation” (p. 111). The paradigm consists of a cyclical process of problem-posing, dialogic reflection and conceptualization of solutions, and praxis in which teachers and parents are equals striving for better schools and communities.

The present work corresponds and builds upon this critical approach to parent involvement. While certainly it too acknowledges and finds value in the different practices among immigrant Latino families versus those idealized by schools, it also demonstrates how these superficially distinct practices sometimes reiterate the intentions and outcomes of more conventional parent–school interactions. Through operation outside school channels—or alternative modes of participation within these channels—our work finds that immigrant Latino parents strive to augment or alter children’s educational experiences, ask questions and obtain information about schooling and education, and attend events or meetings that align with these goals, even if they are not in the school or with the child’s teacher.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Underlying the deficit perspectives that schools or teachers may hold of Latino immigrant parents with regard to their involvement in children’s schooling is an understanding of culture as static and monolithic. These families are viewed homogeneously as apathetic and incapable at worst or uninformed and unprepared at best towards the ways in which they should take part in school interactions and household supports for education (Ramirez, 1999, 2001). A substantial body of research, nevertheless, demonstrates that Latino immigrant families highly value their children’s education and undertake extensive efforts to support it, including collaborating with teachers and schools when they make the effort to involve families (Moll et al., 1992; Olivos, 2006; Olivos et al., 2011; Valdés, 1996). In the present work, we offer a framework for understanding parent involvement as a series of practices aligned with the goals described by authors such as Epstein (2001) and Pomerantz et al. (2007) but very much adapted to the constraints and opportunities of the community to which the families have immigrated. Thus, we argue that attributions of cultural homogeneity to these parent involvement practices ignore the agency parents demonstrate in responding to challenges such as language barriers, racism, immigration status, and economic hardships that hinder participation in the manners that schools most desire. We contend that while there are indeed similarities across the families in how they conceptualize their roles vis-à-vis schools and their children, there are also vast differences and notable influences of other contextual factors, suggesting that what gets labeled a “cultural” style is a negation of parents’ resourcefulness and dedication.

Instrumental to our analysis of the parent involvement practices of the families in this study is the understanding of culture as a dynamic set of practices with which individuals' identification and participation vary over time and contexts. Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas (2002) articulate the concept well in their proposed approach to adequately training teachers of culturally diverse students, in which they state,

We have suggested already that a pragmatic view of culture—one that defines it as the way life is organized in a community, including prevalent ways of using language, interacting, and approaching learning—is valuable to teachers. It allows them to identify subtle aspects of the students' home and community experiences that are relevant to instruction but are usually overlooked. These courses can also reinforce the fact that, while discernible patterns for cultural groups exist, at the same time culture is dynamic and constantly evolving, it varies among individual members within a cultural group, and it varies across communities within a larger cultural group. (p. 88)

Similarly, Kris Gutiérrez and Barbara Rogoff (2003) argue that a consideration of individuals' or groups' historical participation in cultural practices elucidates the variable nature of what are frequently treated to be static traits rooted in ethnicity, race, linguistic background, or other such factors. This cultural–historical approach acknowledges that identification with a particular group indeed implies some shared experiences, understandings, or practices, but that within these commonalities individuals differ in their degrees of participation in particular practices, noting,

A cultural–historical approach assumes that individual development and disposition must be understood in (not separate from) cultural and historical context. In other words, we talk about patterns of people's approaches to given situations without reducing the explanation to a claim that they do what they do *because* they are migrant farm workers or English language learners. We attend to individuals' linguistic and cultural–historical repertoires as well as to their contributions to practices that connect with other activities in which they commonly engage. (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 22, emphasis in original)

Such an understanding of culture renders attempts to make group-wide generalizations about particular practices problematic, to say the least. Nevertheless, it provides the framework through which we can approach investigations of such practices and appreciate the differences and similarities in such practices among members of the same group. This, in turn, sheds light on other factors that may inform individual's specific means of engaging said

practices. Among the parents interviewed in this study, factors such as time spent living in the U.S., place of work, affiliation to particular networks of information, personal experiences with U.S. schools, number of children in U.S. schools, availability of information in Spanish, and the presence of bilingual staff at a child's school all shaped the manner in which parents involved themselves in children's schooling.

## Methods and Procedures

In the San Francisco Bay Area suburb in which this study was conducted, Latinos comprise nearly 65% of the population. The goal of this study was to seek out a sample that had immigrated to the U.S. (as opposed to second or third generation Latinos) and had children of varying ages and levels of experience in U.S. schools to ascertain the processes by which immigrant parents negotiated a role for themselves vis-à-vis schools and children's schooling. Given that the study hoped to capture and describe a variety of such possible processes, there was no need for a statistically representative sample from which findings could be directly extrapolated to generalizations; rather, priority was given to gathering a sample that elucidated the networks and pathways of social knowledge while differing on key independent variables as suggested by Trost (1986), who proposes a framework of selectivity in snowball sampling described as nonrepresentative stratification.

The process of snowball, or chain referral, sampling relied on the research team approaching several key gatekeepers in the community. These individuals worked at organizations that provided support to recent immigrants and were chosen based on one researcher's prior familiarity with the community as a former classroom teacher and from the past research of other members of the interview team. Specifically, we approached personnel at a school, an afterschool program affiliated with a Catholic church, an evangelical church, a nonprofit organization that supports immigrant parents, and a public library. Approaching a variety of gatekeepers allowed researchers to capture a series of social networks, all located within the same community, but possibly with different orientations towards schools and parent participation in schooling. As Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) note, chain referral sampling does not consist of a simple, self-sustaining process of participant referrals. Indeed, the research team repeatedly met to determine which particular chains warranted further exploration based on participant characteristics and the willingness of participants to in turn become research assistants by referring acquaintances. Moreover, the information obtained through particular social networks warranted broadening of the participant base to include not only recent immigrants arriving in

the prior five years (one original independent variable of participant selection) but also those with longer time spans in the U.S.

This adaptive nature of the chain referral sampling method exemplifies its numerous advantages for particular qualitative inquiry. As the project originally aimed to describe the experiences and knowledge of recent immigrants, and given the contentious and harrowing experience that immigration and adaptation to a new community can be, especially for those of undocumented status, a sampling method suited to accessing relatively hidden populations (Birnacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008) was necessary. Nevertheless, the process of incorporating participants as research assistants revealed unforeseen sources of aid and information for recent immigrants, as well as means of participating in children's schooling that compelled the broadening of the participant base. Such reflection with the aim of capturing the particular processes through which these parents made sense of schools' expectations of them and their own expectations of schools highlights the ability of chain referral sampling to confirm the social nature of knowledge and spur the interactional quality of social knowledge (Noy, 2008). While participant social networks thus strongly informed the data, mindfulness of particular independent variables was maintained. The participants were all immigrants from Latin America, but they notably differed on their time in the U.S., their primary source of information about schools in the U.S., and their own prior formal schooling experiences. For analytical purposes the time in the U.S. variable was divided into three categories: those in the U.S. under five years, or less than the time that a U.S.-born child would usually take to reach school age; those in the U.S. for 5–24 years (although certainly not all immigrants in this time frame were the direct result of the 1986 IRCA legislation, its mention in the legalization of informants' relatives who later sponsored their migration made it a reasonable demarcation); and those in the U.S. over 24 years.

Ultimately, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Three of these interviews were carried out with husband–wife pairs, while the rest were with individuals. Summary characteristics of participants are provided in Table 2. Two interviews were not considered for this project as the respondents did not have children in American schools but were nevertheless important members of one particular referral chain. The interviews, of which key questions related to schooling are provided in Figure 1, probed participation in children's schooling with questions addressing communication with teachers, presence at the school, and helping children with homework, but other aspects of life were discussed as well, including information sources about schools and other services in the receiving community, family and social networks in the area, and philosophies on parenting, among others. It is important to note that as the

interviews were semi-structured and carried out as conversations in Spanish, participants were allowed and at times encouraged to elaborate on responses and to explore tangents that, nevertheless, revealed insights into their participation patterns or attitudes towards schooling, while in other situations certain topics received less discussion.

Table 2. Participant Characteristics as Percentage of Informant Total

Time in U.S. (to date of interview in 2010) ( <i>N</i> = 24)	
• Under 5 years	25%
• 5–24 years	50%
• Over 24 years (predating 1986 amnesty)	25%
General Age of Children in U.S. Schools ( <i>N</i> = 24)	
• Preschool age (0–4)	17%
• Elementary age	33%
• Middle school age	29%
• High school age	42%
• College, vocational school, or working adult age	25%
Informant's Highest Completed Level of Formal Schooling ( <i>N</i> = 21)	
• Less than primary in home country	23.8%
• Primary in home country	23.8%
• Secondary in home country	23.8%
• Post-secondary in home country	9.5%
• Primary in U.S.	0.0%
• Secondary in U.S.	19.0%
• Post-secondary in U.S.	0.0%

*Note.* To protect confidentiality, only summary characteristics provided. Participants with children in multiple grade level groups counted for both categories

A note here is warranted with respect to the researchers' positions vis-a-vis the community and the research participants. Giampapa (2011) discusses the importance of considering dynamic power relationships between researcher and participants, as well as how elements of these identities are contested or upheld in interactions. With established connections to the community as a former teacher and local resident, and as researchers with extensive participatory roles in local churches and schools, we benefited from notable familiarity with the gatekeeper organizations and some of the personnel. In turn, the solid relationships the staff at these organizations had with eventual research participants allowed a considerable level of trust and reliability. Additionally, the ability to conduct interviews in Spanish also afforded a degree of confidence and comfort among research participants. Of course, our affiliation with

a nearby university, as well as dynamics of class and gender differences that could emerge during interviews were a factor in considering the reliability of interview data (particularly when a young male researcher interviewed women of comparable age, which the team found to produce greater guardedness at the outset of interviews). Gauging the depth and length of responses at different points in the interview as well as the internal consistency of participants' responses (that is, ensuring that statements were not contradictory across the interview) assuaged concerns.

Prior experiences and migration:

1. Can you tell me about where you're from and what life was like there?
  - a. Where did you live?
  - b. What was your occupation?
  - c. What was your quality of life like?
  - d. Were your children born there?
2. What does it mean to be a good parent where you're from? What things does a good parent do?
3. Can you tell me about the schools in your home community?
4. Can you tell me about when you came to the United States and why you came? Tell me about your migration experience. (How long have you been here? Did you arrive directly in this community? How many relatives came with you or were here before you? Who helped you get situated? What opportunities and costs were there to migrating? How's your English?)
5. What does it mean to be a good parent here in this community?
6. Can you tell me about the experiences you've had with your children's schools here?
  - a. How did you learn about your children's current schools?
  - b. What is the work like that children bring home?
  - c. How are you involved with your children's homework?
  - d. Do you ever go to the school? What is it like visiting the school?
  - e. Do you join the school or teachers in activities or meetings? How have these experiences been?
7. How well do schools provide information to parents? Can you elaborate on what would help you get more or better information?
8. What advice would you give to other immigrant parents who have recently arrived?

Figure 1. Key Question Stems From Semi-Structured Interviews Regarding Schools and Parenting

Interviews were transcribed and then coded through various iterations. Initial codes sought mentions of parents' schooling experiences in the home country and in the U.S., children's schooling experiences, sources of information regarding schools, interactions with children's schools in the U.S. and in the home country, comparisons between schools in the home country and the U.S., parenting behaviors connected to children's learning, and questions

or misunderstandings regarding schools. From these initial codes we observed that a number of practices parents mentioned for gathering information or supporting children's schooling were situated outside the school, and thus refined the codes to highlight specific behaviors in and out of schools intended to bolster learning. This refinement yielded principal involvement categories of information gathering (*asking*), attendance and participation (*attending*), and seeking additional or alternative educational resources (*altering/augmenting*).

## Findings

Besides the well-documented resilience and adaptability of immigrant families, our interviews revealed a remarkable concern on the part of parents for their children's learning and academic success. In its own right, this finding contradicts oft-held beliefs of parental apathy and academic negligence. Further, our interviews revealed a great deal of parent participation in precisely the ways that schools often prescribe—attendance at conferences and meetings, reading with children at home, helping with homework, and the like. Most importantly, however, informants repeatedly mentioned forms of involvement that they deemed valuable to children's learning that are not always considered as such by teachers or schools. While certainly some strategies bear more direct benefits on conventional measures of academic achievement than others (e.g., reading to children at home bears greater association with reading comprehension than church attendance), the priority for our analysis was the meaning that the participants themselves attached to the practice. Schooling, as seen by many of our participants, is but one way in which children learn and only provides a fraction of the skills, values, and traits that parents hope children will develop to become contributors to society in adulthood. Indeed, some of these other involvement strategies were intended to develop character or escape harmful peer influence, which parents in turn presumed would support classroom learning. Also of note, interviews revealed that even for those very familiar with the receiving community and its schools, structural obstacles and information gaps hindered their involvement or ability to otherwise support children's academic pursuits.

Taking into account both the commonly touted and less frequently articulated forms of parent involvement, we categorized parents' participatory behaviors under three labels: **asking questions**, **attending**, and **altering/augmenting**. **Asking questions** refers to parents approaching teachers or other school personnel about children's progress in school or how to support learning, a behavior well in line with schools' conventional requests of parents. In addition, however, the label applies to inquiries made to family and friends

with more experience in the community about how to navigate school systems (such as enrolling students) or even questions that might be perceived as confrontational by school staff. Another instance of asking occurs when parents consult acquaintances in the culture of power, such as employers, church authorities, or staff of nonprofit organizations about their rights as parents or processes by which they could better support their children when they fear that approaching schools directly with these matters would cause trouble.

**Attending** behaviors refer to parents being present at particular events or locations. Certainly this captures a great deal of conventional participation such as going to parent–teacher conferences, school assemblies, or field trips. Nevertheless, the label also encompasses a series of additional behaviors, such as attending workshops and informational sessions hosted by nonprofit organizations and the public library about, for instance, how to better support children in their learning or how to finance college, and regular church attendance, which parents thought indispensable to children’s moral upbringing and an indirect scholastic support by shaping resistance to negative peer influence. Finally, several informants mentioned attending some form of adult education, whether to complete a GED, obtain some sort of professional certification, or improve their English proficiency, which they believed would not only allow them to provide better material support for children’s learning but also to exemplify the importance of education to younger generations.

The third category, **altering/augmenting**, refers to parents’ efforts to enhance children’s benefit from schooling. In some cases, this consisted of enrolling students in afterschool programs or summer programs to extend the learning of the school day and to provide help with homework or English language development that working parents could not. Likewise, this category captures parents’ work to obtain greater services for children within their current school, such as special education provisions or additional support in particular subjects. With regard to the altering aspect of this category, this often took the form of parents vying for new teachers, new schools, or new instructional programs within the school. Additionally, parents sometimes framed the very act of migration as one of augmenting children’s academic opportunity. Table 3 presents these three categories and some of their corresponding behaviors along with the percentage of participants who reported engaging in said practices.

Table 3 demonstrates the widespread engagement in asking, attending, and altering/augmenting strategies on the part of the parents interviewed, with 88% of participants mentioning some form of asking participation, and 100% attending some form of educationally supportive event as well as making efforts to alter or augment their children’s educational trajectory. Moreover, since the interviews did not specifically inquire into these behaviors, it is possible

that they are even more prevalent than our analysis reports. For instance, while a notable majority of participants attend church regularly, only 25% specifically mentioned the role of church in children's educational formation (most frequently as a way to protect children from the temptations of drugs, gangs, or sex, thus allowing them to devote themselves to their studies). Similarly, while all participants were immigrants and many noted the higher quality of American schools in terms of teachers' treatment of students and schools' provision of services as compared to schools in the home country, only those who expressly mentioned schooling as a motivating factor in the decision to migrate were counted for this intervention as a form of altering/augmenting a child's educational opportunities. Certainly within these umbrella categories particular behaviors were more prevalent. Very few parents lobbied to change their child's teacher within a school or to address a teacher's specific behaviors (8.3%), while a large portion of the sample sought to augment children's schooling with afterschool programs, summer school, tutoring, or special services such as speech therapy (71%).

Table 3. Percentage of Participants Reporting Asking, Attending, and Altering/Augmenting Involvement Strategies (*N* = 24)

Strategies Reported	%
Asking questions:	88%
• Asking teachers/staff	75%
• Asking family/friends: registration, materials, processes	58%
• Asking acquaintances in culture of power—employers, church authorities, nonprofits—about rights, processes	46%
Attending:	100%
• School events, meetings	83%
• Church	25%
• Parenting/leadership workshops	25%
• Adult education	38%
Altering/Augmenting:	100%
• Vying for new teachers or new teacher behaviors	8%
• Vying for new schools	58%
• Vying for new programs/services	71%
• Citing children's education as a motivating factor in migration	25%

In addition, distinctions can clearly be made among groups based on participant characteristics. A common form of altering/augmenting children's

educational trajectories within our sample was to apply for a program that enrolled children in the affluent school system of the neighboring city, also part of a different county. While this strategy recurred within one particular network of our referral chain that included individuals who had been in the U.S. for the longest periods among our participants, it did not occur once outside of it, and it is fair to say that the frequency of children successfully enrolling in this transfer program was overrepresented in our data. Nevertheless, this overrepresentation provides important insight into the information immigrants gain by virtue of social connections among those with more years and experience in American schools as well as the challenges of diffusing this information beyond such proximate networks. With this in mind, however, no chain of referral in the sample is large enough to allow generalizable claims about particular participant characteristics that correspond with (let alone predict) any single involvement strategy, and it is instead instructive to delve deeper into the interviews to appreciate the processes by which the observed involvement strategies arise and are engaged within participants' given circumstances.

### Asking

A common argument in the deficit perspective of Latino immigrant parents is that they are less inclined to engage teachers or school personnel with questions beyond matters of behavior. While in our sample this argument does not widely apply, as 75% of participants reported asking teachers or other school officials questions, we cannot claim representativeness for our sample. What we can observe, however, is that beyond simply approaching school staff with questions, immigrant parents consult myriad other sources of information regarding children's schooling, especially when questions can be construed as contentious. Some sources—such as relatives, friends, members of the same church congregation, or neighbors with more experience with American schools—are hardly unusual and cannot be said to be exclusive to Latino immigrants seeking information, but others demonstrate the resourcefulness and commitment of these particular parents to their children's education.

One rather surprising source that families consulted applied to those who worked in the homes or offices of other families residing in the affluent adjacent county. Several mothers in our sample worked as nannies or housekeepers for families with more familiarity with American schools. Characterizing her willingness to seek information from such connections, one participant offered:

*Y yo, ha ayudado mucho que he trabajado mucho con familias abogadas. Yo les pregunto. Si los padres. Llevo 14 años trabajando en esto de nannies y me han tocado puros abogados. Y cuando tengo una pregunta, yo les digo, “¿Qué*

*se puede hacer aquí?*” [And I, it’s helped that I’ve worked a lot with lawyer families. I ask them. The parents. I’ve been working as a nanny for 14 years and always for lawyers. And when I have a question, I ask them, “What can be done here?”] (Note: All translations are our own.)

Similarly, another participant offered a specific instance of consulting the family that employed her about procuring an evaluation for special education for her child despite the school’s insistence that one was not necessary, and even recruiting the family as advocates for her child:

*Pues, él tenía problemas porque iba muy bajo en calificaciones pero pedimos que le hicieran una, como se llama, evaluación. Y como que no la necesitaba. Y luego, yo trabajo para una americana y trabajo en su casa y yo le comentaba a ella. Que yo miraba que el niño tenía problemas con aprendizaje y ella habló con el director de la escuela y ella pidió una evaluación—porque yo la había pedido, pero como que no me hicieron caso. [Well, he had problems because his grades were very low, and we asked for a, what’s it called, evaluation. And [the school said] that he didn’t need it. And then, I work for an American woman in her home, and I spoke to her about it, that I could see the boy had problems learning, and she spoke to the school principal and asked for an evaluation—because I had asked, but they didn’t pay me any mind.]*

A second important and infrequently acknowledged recourse for information in this community is the host of public and civil sector organizations aimed at helping parents support children’s education. A number of parents mentioned consulting the public library for specific questions about additional support for children in their English language development, help with homework, accessing services such as medical care or immunizations necessary to enroll in school, or choices of schools within the area. Similarly, several participants mentioned coming across nonprofit organizations that support immigrant families and resorting to these as sources of comparable advice or knowledge. One father, for example, approached a staff member at one such organization seeking help when his daughter’s grades were low (Note: all names of participants, organizations, and schools have been changed to protect participant confidentiality and anonymity):

*Entonces empecé a buscar manera, y volví a hablar con la misma persona, y me dijo “¿Sabes qué? Tienes que ir a las reuniones. Tienen reuniones mensuales.” Entonces me dijo ella que yo tenía que ir a hablar, “¿Ya conoces a la directora de la escuela? Tienes que buscar a la directora, pide ayuda, pide programas después de escuela, pero ve y escucha lo que dicen.” Ya teníamos a Susana en programa después de escuela que era con El Hogar, y El Hogar*

*sí le pone a uno, presionan a uno para estar allí presente. De esa manera yo empecé a ver que sí era la necesidad que yo asistiera y me involucrara en la educación de mis hijos.* [Then I started looking for a solution, and I spoke to the same person, and she said, “You know what? You have to go to the meetings. They have monthly meetings.” Then she told me I had to go there and speak to them. “Do you know the principal? You need to go find the principal, ask for help, ask for afterschool programs, and go hear what they have to say.” We already had Susana in the afterschool program at El Hogar, and there at El Hogar they pressure you to be present. In that way I began to realize the need for me to attend events and become involved in my children’s education.]

This instance proves especially interesting because it simultaneously demonstrates the value of consulting sources outside the school for specific information while also demonstrating the way such organizations attempt to educate parents about behaviors that American schools expect and respond to from parents.

In brief, asking for information or assistance emerges as a widespread involvement strategy on the part of the parents in our sample. While in some cases it may be hidden from teachers and schools, this is not the result of apathy or ignorance but rather of parents’ resourcefulness and willingness to approach others. Obviously, such involvement interventions are highly dependent on circumstances, including access to informed or empowered individuals and networks or the availability of alternate information sources such as non-profit organizations and public libraries. Unfortunately, while these alternative information sources often provided essential support, they could also perpetuate misinformation. For a number of participants, asking within the referral chain for educational advice resulted in enrolling children in a transitional program through which children forego their senior year of high school and instead begin college coursework early at a local community college. While such a path accelerates professionalization and precludes one year of college tuition, it also denies students the opportunity to take honors level courses at the high school level that would be necessary to apply for highly selective colleges and universities. Thus, while asking questions is a frequent involvement strategy, bypassing schools in the process can provide two notable problems. First, it can provide information or advice that school personnel such as teachers and counselors may not recommend, and secondly, it might perpetuate among school staff the illusion that parents are uninterested.

### **Attending**

As important as it is for parents to ask questions and obtain information or advice through inquiry, much is made of their mere presence at school, or

lack thereof, in the parent involvement discourse. As with asking questions, our interviews revealed that not only do parents make themselves present at school, but they also attend a series of other events and programs that they see as supportive of their children's education. As with asking questions, parents' engagement with these practices is contextually dependent on their own prior education, experiences with schools, and access to information about such opportunities, but the fact that every single participant in the sample mentioned attending—in one form or another—suggests a high degree of investment and effort on the part of parents regarding their children's learning.

Certainly the most commonly regarded form of attendance with respect to parents is their presence in the school, especially for parent-teacher conferences and similar events. The vast majority of our participants, 83%, mentioned attending meetings or conferences with teachers, volunteering in the classroom, working in some capacity at the school site, or otherwise being involved through attendance. One very typical example is offered by a mother of two elementary-aged children. Having lived in the U.S. for 15 years and with a vast information network through her church congregation, she explains her participation as a school volunteer and attendance at meetings, noting the importance of being seen:

*Con el open house o en la primera junta del salón, nos explican en qué puede uno ayudar, para ser voluntario... y a mí me gusta. Los niños ven el interés de uno. Y cuando uno ayuda, les muestras a los niños que te preocupan y que estás enterado, y para el futuro que papá y mamá están siempre ahí. [With the open house or at the first class meeting, they explain how one can help, to volunteer...and I like it. The children see one's interest. And when one helps, you show the children that you care about them and that you're aware and, for the future, that dad and mom are always there.]*

Other parents, meanwhile, described the target of their attendance at school less in terms of children's perceptions but rather those of the teachers. Echoing a commonly held view among participants, one father of children in middle school and elementary school noted that teachers were more mindful of one's children if they saw the parent frequently at the school:

*Es que a los maestros si uno no les pone presión, no trabajan con sus niños. Entonces, como que necesitan que el padre....Creo que eso es lo que ellos quieren, que los padres estén involucrados en el sistema educativo. [It's that teachers don't work with your children unless you put pressure on them. So it's like they need the parent....I think that's what they want, for parents to be involved in the school system.]*

Similarly, a woman who has spent 20 years in the U.S., a mother of two high school-aged sons, acknowledged teachers as the main focus of her attendance at school events. She recognized the opportunity to volunteer in the classroom as a chance to observe the teacher and the school and to ensure her children were receiving the necessary supports, ultimately acting on this information to seek a different school for her sons:

*Pedí permiso que me dejaran ir con mi hijo de voluntaria porque yo quería que él se habituara a las escuelas. Pero dentro de mí lo que yo quería era conocer las escuelas. Hablé con la maestra—una semana, nada más una semana. Ella me dio permiso; yo le ayudaba y mi hijo ahí sentadito.... Pero yo podía observar, y vi que era muy deficiente. [I asked permission for them to let me go with my son as a volunteer so that he could get accustomed to the schools. But inside, I wanted to get to know the schools. I talked to the teacher—one week, just one week. She gave me permission; I helped her out, and my son sat there.... But I could observe, and I saw that it was very deficient.]*

Thus, attendance at school meetings or events is an acknowledged strategy of parent involvement within our sample, but by no means the only one. Just as when seeking information, parents often consulted sources outside the school. A number of parents attended workshops offered by community organizations that instructed them in approaching schools or supporting children's learning at home. For instance, the organization El Hogar (that answered the aforementioned father's question about improving his daughter's grades by making his presence felt at school) provides workshops and meetings through a parent-led council that demystifies this process for recently immigrated families. Other organizations provide workshops about the college application process, including academic requirements and information about financing a college education for one's children.

Less conventional invocations of attending strategies also arose in the interviews, particularly attending church services. While attending church services seems to hold no direct bearing on children's schooling, the explanations offered by the participants who made such a connection clearly demonstrate its correspondence to the affective involvement practices described by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) wherein a positive light and sense of importance are cast upon schooling. Wary of negative peer influences in the school or community, parents engaging this strategy describe church participation as a means by which to protect children from such influences and, more importantly, channel a student's focus towards higher priorities of education and a religion-based morality. One such parent, a mother of six whose children had all completed high school in the U.S., nicely captures the sentiment:

*En ese tiempo también yo conocí el evangelio y también eso influenció mucho porque te abre los ojos, puedes mirar otras cosas que no mirabas, actitudes, muchas cosas. Entonces pasaron dos eventos a la misma vez que eso nos abrió el camino. Por eso fue que quizás yo pude mirar la diferencia que tenían mis hijos, porque a lo mejor si tenía esa misma visión, pues quizás no hubiera podido mirar nada. Entonces eso me ayudó a mirar que mis hijos estaban rodeados de un círculo que no les iba a ayudar, iban a quedar atrapados en medio de ese círculo, aunque yo estaba tratando de inducirlos a otra cosa. [In that time, I also came to know the gospel and that had a great influence, because it opens your eyes, you can see things you couldn't see before, attitudes, many things. Then there were two events at the same time that cleared the path. That's why I was able to see the difference for my children, because maybe if I had that same old vision I wouldn't have been able to see. Then that helped me see that my children were surrounded by a circle that wouldn't help them, they were going to stay stuck in the middle of that circle, even though I was trying to lead them to something else.]*

Finally, a number of participants reported taking part in adult education programs, whether to improve their English, acquire computing skills, or earn certifications for becoming teaching assistants, early childhood educators, or completing the GED. While certainly participants noted the economic benefits of such education, several directly linked it to children's schooling, noting that it improved their ability to communicate with school staff, helped them understand and assist children with their homework, or taught them useful skills to support learning in the home. One mother with three sons in an elementary school in the adjacent county, for example, noted the importance of a computing class, because many school-related communications among parents occurred by email at her children's school:

*Sí, porque muchos, por ejemplo el email. Que dijera uno, ¿qué tal que nos comunicamos por email? Y eso era, yo al principio que veía que todos los padres se comunicaban por email y yo no sabía, ni tenía idea. Y ni siquiera le tomaba atención. [Yes, because many, for example email—one would say, “How about we get in touch by email?” and that was, in the beginning, I saw all the parents communicating by email, and I didn't know, I had no idea. So I didn't even pay attention.]*

In short, while the vast majority of parents participating in our interviews stressed the importance of attending events at the school as an involvement strategy, they also diverted time and energy from such endeavors to attend other meetings that they deemed helpful to children's schooling. By attending

workshops and meetings organized by community organizations, they gained information on how to approach schools and more proactively engage with them. Likewise, some parents gained specific insights into the requirements of different colleges and the steps necessary to apply for and finance a college education. Attending other gatherings such as church services or adult education classes, in the view of some of our participants, helped communicate that schooling and learning were priorities for the household not to be derailed by peer pressure or a lack of language or technical skills. Nevertheless, participants mentioned numerous obstacles (discussed below) that impeded attending strategies.

### **Altering/Augmenting**

Taking measures to alter or augment a child's educational trajectory manifested as a wide range of practices and motivations. In some cases (mentioned by 8% of participants), concerns with a specific teacher or curriculum necessitated efforts to switch the child's program, classroom, or course schedule within the same school, while in others, parents sought to enroll their children in completely different schools or school districts. Under both circumstances, parents demonstrated extensive knowledge and investment in their children's initial learning environment and tremendous agency in seeking alternatives. In one example of the former, a mother with one son in high school and two others enrolled at community colleges recalled taking issue with a perceived bias on the part of one her sons' teachers:

*Por la mayoría yo creo que en grade school sí fueron imparciales, por la mayoría. Tuvo mi hijo una maestra que sí estuvo bastante parcial. Lo bueno es que ya fue el último año en esa escuela y ya estaba listo para salirse. Y él me contaba algunas cosas que hacía la maestra y no lo pude creer, y yo muy asustada, no, y yo vi que sin trabajo [inaudible] que él había llevado a clase, la maestra lo tenía al revés. Y, no, que '¿qué pasa?' Y que me fajo y me pongo con el director. [For the most part I think that in grade school they were impartial, for the most part. My son had a teacher who was very partial. The good thing is that it was his last year at the school, and he was ready to leave. He would tell me some of the things the teacher did, and I couldn't believe it, and I got scared; I saw him without the work [inaudible] that he had taken to class, the teacher had it backwards. And so, like, "What's wrong?" and I got upset and went to the principal.]*

Such dramatic interventions, while demonstrative of parents' awareness and investment in children's schooling, were nevertheless rare. Rather, most requests to change teachers, classrooms, or academic programs within a school related

to accelerating the transition from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to a mainstream track, switching into a bilingual program so children could continue to develop their Spanish language skills, or conversely, switching into ESL or out of bilingual programs to focus on English language development.

In our interviews, a more commonly reported strategy for parents to alter their children's schooling paths was to at least attempt to enroll them at a different school (usually by entering an admissions lottery for a charter school or by applying for scholarships for a private school) or school district (through the aforementioned transfer program) in response to perceived negative conditions in the neighborhood schools. One mother facing such a decision explained her displeasure with local schools' lack of material resources:

*Yo miraba que hacían falta recursos para que los niños pudieran interactuar más entre ellos. Faltaban y como yo agarraba mi idea de que si se les diese un poco más de apoyo económico a esa escuela pudiera la escuela brindarles una mejor educación a los niños. Entonces eso vi. [I could see that there was a lack of resources so children could interact more among themselves. There wasn't enough, and so I got the idea that if the school got more economic support, it could offer the children a better education. That's what I saw.]*

Another mother, reflecting a common concern, described the social environment she perceived at the first school in which she enrolled her children, noting that the potential of negative peer influence drove her to seek alternatives for her children:

*Porque aquí vi y no me gustaban cómo eran las escuelas, me daban miedo. No los quería meter. Vamos a ponerlos en un Christian school. Íbamos a la escuela y puras malas palabras y como nosotros veníamos a la iglesia desde que yo era joven, y yo no quería que mis hijos aprendieran malas palabras o que andaran peleando y decidí, investigué cómo ponerlos allí. [Because here, I looked and didn't like what the schools were like; they scared me. I didn't want to enroll them. We're going to put them in a Christian school. We would go to the {public} school and hear lots of bad words, and since we'd gone to church since I was young, I didn't want my children learning bad words or going around fighting, and I decided, I investigated how to enroll them there.]*

Similarly, another mother commented on her decision to enroll her children in the transfer program with the adjacent county:

*De otra manera creo yo sinceramente que si no los hubiera yo sacado, no creo que hubieran terminado la high school y el grupo de amigos que estaba alrededor de ellos terminó en pandillas, en drogas, matándose. Definitivamente*

*creo que si no hubiera sido eso, pues mis hijos no.* [Otherwise, I sincerely think that, had I not withdrawn them, I don't think they would have finished high school, and the group of friends that was around them ended up in gangs, on drugs, killing themselves. I definitely think that were it not for that, well, not for my children.]

A final and less frequent—although rather drastic—form of altering a child's academic trajectory was to migrate. While obviously all the participants in the sample are immigrants, only a handful mentioned the choice to migrate as, at least in part, motivated by the educational opportunities that such a change would provide. One mother described moving back to Mexico for a year at the behest of the children's father who feared his children would forget their Spanish. However, disappointed with the conditions of the schools there, she moved the family back to the U.S.:

*Bueno, mala experiencia es. No están bien preparadas las escuelas. Los edificios están muy descuidados, los baños un desastre completamente... porque no me gustaba, no me gustaba el sistema, no me gustaba como mis hijos estaban yendo a la escuela... entonces insistí hasta que nos regresamos para acá.* [Well, it's a bad experience. The schools aren't well prepared. The buildings are in disrepair, the restrooms are a complete disaster... because I didn't like it, I didn't like the system, I didn't like how my children were getting to school... so I insisted until we came back here.]

Besides major alterations such as school enrollment or program adjustment, parents also intervened in children's schooling trajectories by supplementing with additional instruction or supports. Many parents enrolled their children in afterschool programs that helped them with their homework or targeted English language development. Others sought special education supports for children with speech delays or poor grades, sometimes despite initial resistance from the school.

The extensive efforts of parents to alter or augment their children's educational opportunities reflect a clear investment and agentic role in the schooling process. More important than the scope of strategies employed or the number of parents engaging the strategies, however, are the circumstances that make them necessary, which often coincide with the reasons for which Latino immigrant parents receive little credit for these and other forms of active participation. Indeed, despite great interest and agency, many parents mentioned in the interviews a host of obstacles to their involvement with schools or children's education in general.

## Obstacles to Involvement

From teachers' and schools' perspective, the most visible obstacles that immigrant Latino parents encounter in their efforts to participate are language barriers, time constraints, and a lack of financial resources (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006; Olivos, 2006; Ramirez, 2003). Certainly, all three of these emerged as challenges for a number of the parents in our interviews. As prior research has noted (Orellana, 2008), some parents mentioned the need for children to translate at parent–teacher conferences or with pieces of correspondence from the school or school district. Likewise, a number of parents expressed regret at not being able to attend meetings or conferences because of conflicts with work schedules or the challenges of finding childcare during the designated time. One husband and wife pair, for instance, noted that despite a satisfactory level of information and resources, their schedules made it difficult to capitalize on all the opportunities:

*Allí hay información...a veces uno no tiene tiempo para asistir o una cosa o a veces ya está cansado. A lo mejor esa es una de las desventajas. Porque los adultos tenemos que trabajar, entonces se hace un poco difícil tomar los programas.* [There's information...sometimes one doesn't have time to attend or something, or sometimes one's already tired. Perhaps that's one of the disadvantages. Because we adults have to work, so it's difficult to take part in the programs.]

Less frequently acknowledged challenges are captured in several of the studies reviewed by Ferguson (2008), notably the sense of welcome fostered by the school (or lack thereof), perceptions of bias, or misconceptions among stakeholders. Various participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome at school events, a sentiment captured well by a mother of four who recounted her husband's reluctance to attend any further school meetings:

*Mi esposo decía que puro güero. Decía, "Yo no, allí pura gente mayor y güero." Y yo tenía 21 años. Yo me casé a los 18, 19. A los 21 – y pura gente mayor, y güeros. Yo iba de todas maneras a los meetings, pero mi esposo fue una vez y dijo, "No. A mí no me gusta. Ver pura gente güera y puro inglés."* [My husband said it was all White people. He said, "Not me, there it's all old people and white people." And I was 21 years old. I got married at 18, 19. Now at 21—and it's all older people and Whites. I went anyway to the meetings, but my husband went once and said, "No. I don't like it—seeing only Whites and everything in English."]

Similarly, a mother of two expressed feelings of unease attending school meetings for her children enrolled in the adjacent county:

*Pues algunos bien, otros lo ven a uno medio raro—algunos, la mayoría bien, pero otros sí como que un poco mal. Lo miran a uno, y esa es la razón por la cual yo no me siento completamente a gusto en las reuniones. [Well, some are good, others look at you strangely—some, the majority, good, but others definitely kind of badly. They look at you, and that’s the reason I don’t feel completely comfortable at the meetings.]*

Others mentioned specific instances of bias that they or their children encountered that soured relationships between the family and the school. One mother of six described her daughter’s experience in high school as adversarial when she began enrolling in Advanced Placement courses:

*La ayudaron mucho, pero como que dijeron, “Tú, no más puedes llegar hasta aquí, pero no puedes pasar.” Ahí fue cuando miramos, yo nunca había sabido de racismo, sino ahí nos dimos cuenta, cuando llegó a ese nivel que le empezaron a cerrar las puertas. “Tú no puedes aquí, tú no puedes agarrar esas clases, son muy difíciles, no hay mujeres ahí, no hay latinas ahí, hay puros anglosajones, no te vas a sentir bien. Te vas a sentir mal si no puedes, te vas a avergonzar.” [They helped her a lot, but like they said, “You can only get this far, but you can’t go farther.” That’s when we noticed, I’d never known about racism, but there we took notice, when she got to that level and doors started closing. “You can’t manage here, you can’t take these classes, they’re too difficult, there are no women there, no Latinas there, just purely Anglo-Saxons, you’re not going to feel at ease. You’re going to feel bad if you don’t succeed, you’re going to feel ashamed.”]*

Given such experiences and challenges, it becomes rather clear why many immigrant Latino parents, even those with long periods of residence in the U.S. and extensive English language skills, may prefer pathways of involvement outside the school—through community organizations, social networks, or religious organizations, for example. This raises two items for consideration, and the two are not mutually exclusive: first, how teachers and schools can minimize the discomfort felt by parents in their efforts to be present at the school, and secondly, to the extent that these alternative avenues of information and involvement may be inexorable and even beneficial, how teachers and schools can better coordinate with these entities to prevent information gaps, miscommunications, or even misinformation.

## **Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

In summary, the participants in our interviews demonstrated extensive interest and involvement in their children’s schooling, both directly through

the school and through numerous alternative pathways that are less visible to school personnel. These findings run contrary to many of the deficit perspectives that hold Latino immigrant parents to be incapable of or indifferent to playing an agentive role in their children's education. Nevertheless, the interviews also raise concerns about obstacles that impede parent participation in the ways that both schools and parents themselves would find ideal, as well as about information gaps that emerge when parents rely on organizations and networks outside the school to mediate their involvement. Numerous publications already outline strategies for ameliorating some of these challenges (e.g., Hamayan and Freeman, 2006, provide insights from a variety of knowledgeable contributors as to how different schools have improved their contacts and relationships with parents of ELLs). In building on this existing literature, we argue that more fundamental to any strategy implemented is a mindset that engages parents as equal collaborators in their children's education.

Such a stance would require abandoning sweeping generalizations about the abilities or ambitions of immigrant parents or distinct cultural groups and recognizing the diversity of experiences and resources even within a single community. As noted by previously mentioned scholars (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), it requires moving from the school into the geographic community to inquire as to parents' expectations and objectives for involvement with their children's schooling, thereby learning about the broader contexts that shape parents' understandings and avenues of involvement. Using this information, schools can address matters of mutual concern, draw attention to matters made salient by various stakeholders, and harness the organizational and communicative capacity of community organizations and social networks to disperse information more effectively.

### **Suggestions for Schools**

Teachers, administrators, and staff must engage parents dialogically as equals. This requires understanding and having a genuine interest in the personal and community contexts from which families approach schools. As encouraged by Ladson-Billings (2006) and Villegas and Lucas (2002), schools would do well to engage parents outside of the school through activities such as home visits and participation in community events. Such interactions provide school staff with a better understanding of the surrounding community and the experiences of families in said community, while fomenting positive relationships. Additionally, schools should open and nurture channels of communication with families and local organizations. Some schools are fortunate enough to have funding for a community/parent liaison position on staff that is charged with hearing parents' concerns and advocating on their behalf to

the school, as well as reinforcing schools' messages to parents. For schools not so fortunate in terms of resources, such responsibility must be diffused among all staff. Teachers and other school personnel must make the school inviting through the use of, among other strategies, interpreters, flexible hours for school events, childcare during conferences, transportation to and from school events, an integrated multicultural curriculum, opportunities to participate in school governance, and inclusion of community languages and practices in the school (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006). As our interviews indicate, a great number of parents' questions go unanswered, and misunderstandings or misinformation pose additional challenges to the many that immigrant parents already face. Information regarding enrollment, assessment, expectations, and curriculum must thus be made available clearly and directly.

We reiterate, however, along with the advice of Olivos et al. (2011), that measures undertaken in the spirit of remediation and deficit perspectives offer no true potential for transformation, only paternalism and new ways for schools to charge parents with not participating. Indeed, essential to the dialogic relationship is that schools listen to parents regarding the particular interventions and practices they would find most helpful and provide the information families find most necessary. Of course, listening to parents requires bilingual staff or, at the least, available interpreters so that parents dealing with language barriers can still partake in the dialogue. To address this needed change in stance toward dialogic relationships, we turn our attention to teacher preparation.

### **Suggestions for Teacher Education Programs**

Citing her own work with teacher candidates, Ladson-Billings (2006) notes an overreliance on culture as an explanatory factor for parent involvement and student achievement patterns. To address this overly simplistic understanding, Ladson-Billings proposes a greater role for anthropological perspectives in teacher training, not only in curriculum content but also through ethnographic participation in the communities in which candidates undertake their student teaching and even international student teaching service. Such content and experiences would reinforce understandings of culture as dynamic and contextual, while making candidates cognizant of their own cultural participation practices and expectations. Assignments such as home visits, attending community events, interviews with parents and students, investigations of community histories and current conditions, and profound discussion and training in concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy ought to go a long way toward combating societal deficit perspectives and preparing teachers to engage parents dialogically when devising optimal participation forms. Moreover, aspiring and current teachers must be made aware of the power differentials that

exist between them and immigrant parents. As several of our interviews attest, it often takes the intervention of third party advocates before parents feel comfortable making demands of teachers and schools. Teachers educated in the workings of power and how this dictates what is “right” and “normal” may be more mindful of their position in relationships with parents.

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Luis E. Poza is an assistant professor of culturally and linguistically diverse education in the School of Education and Human Development at University of Colorado, Denver. He is a former elementary school teacher with research interests in bilingual education, teacher preparation, and language attitudes in multilingual settings. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Luis Poza, Campus Box 106, PO Box 173364, Denver, CO, 80217-3364, or email [luis.poza@ucdenver.edu](mailto:luis.poza@ucdenver.edu)

Maneka Deanna Brooks is an assistant professor of literacy in multicultural contexts at California State University, Fresno's Kremen School of Education and Human Development. She is a former high school teacher whose research focuses on the intersection of bilingualism and adolescent literacy.

Guadalupe Valdés is the Bonnie Katz Tenenbaum Professor of Education at Stanford University. She specializes in applied linguistics and has carried out extensive work on bilingualism and education among Latinos in the United States. She is the author of *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between families and schools* (Teachers College Press, 1996).