International Parents Navigating Parental Involvement in a U.S. School: A Call for Intentionally Responsive Schools

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Focusing on a group of international parents who came to the United States as visiting scholars, graduate students, or their partners, this qualitative study delineates the nature of their experiences as they navigated learning about parental involvement in a U.S. school. Despite the parents' extensive formal schooling in their home countries, they still experienced parental involvement as a process of adaptation to and discovery of expectations and permitted forms of involvement in the United States. They often learned of opportunities informally through contact with other parents. The school personnel with whom they engaged were critical in supporting their adjustment to the new school system, and the language and professional skills they brought with them also influenced how they interacted with school personnel. Our findings call schools to make intentional efforts to be culturally and linguistically responsive through informing and involving parents who are unfamiliar with U.S. schooling rather than leaving them to find their own way.

Schools in the United States and across the globe have difficulty establishing compelling partnerships with minoritized parents and engaging them with their children's education (Malone, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2015). Literature suggests that the conventional ways schools operate privilege certain groups while marginalizing others (Auerbach, 2007; Boutte & Johnson, 2013; Lareau, 1987; Urkmez et al., 2022). Avoiding

disenfranchisement requires a conscious and active effort from schools (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2012). Even when schools treat all parents in the same manner and place the same expectations on all for parental involvement, some parents could still experience marginalization (Devlieghere & Vandenbroeck, 2022; Lareau, 1987). In fact, one problem is assuming that "all parents are the same, with the same needs, and that their children can be treated in the same way" (Crozier, 2001, p. 329). When schools fail to recognize and to be reflective of parents' diversity and expect them to comply with traditional ways of being involved, they unavoidably privilege some groups while marginalizing others (Crozier, 2001; López et al., 2001). Migrant parents and families, whose different strengths, needs, and priorities are not engaged or addressed by schools, may become victims of this problem. Despite the number of studies focusing on parental involvement, these parents are still subject to marginalizing conditions in schools (Fernández & López, 2017; G. López, 2001).

Extant literature focusing on migrant parents' involvement in U.S. schools often focuses on immigrant families who settle from Central or South America in the United States (e.g., DeMatthews et al., 2016; Fernández & López, 2017; G. López, 2001) and highlights various challenges that these families shoulder to support their children's education (Martínez, 2021; Moreno & Chuang, 2011). In such studies, these families often face extra challenges such as lack of access to quality education, job opportunities, and health services. Still, even if those challenges are not present, others, like cultural and linguistic challenges to engaging their children's schools, still exist for parents not born in the United States (García Coll et al., 2002), and these challenges are shouldered in the absence of immediate as extended family members (Long et al., 2018; Mukminin & McMahon, 2013). Using a nationally representative data set, Turney and Kao (2009) found that "minority immigrant parents perceived a greater number and magnitude of barriers to getting involved in their children's elementary school than did native-born White parents, after controlling for other demographic and socioeconomic variables" (p. 267). Of importance, educators' lack of effective response to cultural and linguistic diversity appears to be a critical reason contributing to the barriers to parental involvement in schools (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Johnson, 2007; Kim, 2002).

Trends over the decades have shown increases in international enrollment in graduate student programs in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2018). Of the 1.1 million international students who attended U.S. higher education institutions in the 2016–2017 academic year, close to 400,000 of those were graduate students (Zong & Batalova, 2018), some of whom brought their spouses and children. For our study, we recruited a group of international parents who came to the United States as visiting scholars, graduate students, or their partners. In each family, at least one parent had obtained a higher education degree within their home country prior to migrating to the United States.

International graduate students and visiting scholars enroll their children in schools situated in proximity to the universities in which they study. These schools, then, are in positions to connect with these families, whose cultural, linguistic, and contextual diversity adds another layer of complexity to the responsibility of engaging parents. However, as suggested in the scholarly literature, engaging culturally and linguistically diverse parents has become an increasingly important aspect for

educators to address, and one for which they often do not feel prepared (Young et al., 2010).

Our study aims to increase understanding of the experiences of international parents who are trying to get involved in their children's U.S. schooling. Rather than focusing on a context where parents face external challenges, such as lack of access to quality education, job opportunities, or health services, we chose to examine a school with a reputation for quality education, considered a top 50 elementary school in the state (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2021) and known for its high enrollment of international families. By examining a school regarded as being high quality, we can then focus beyond the issue of access to quality education. Focusing on this group enables us to demonstrate culturally and linguistically related struggles that parents coming from outside the United States face regardless of their educational attainment. This is important because previous research presents parents' educational level as a factor affecting their involvement (Bogenschneider, 1997; Shumow et al., 2011; Vera et al., 2012). To guide this endeavor, we asked one main research question: "How do international parents, living in the United States due to their or their spouses' status as graduate students or visiting scholars, experience their children's school, known for serving many international families?"

Literature Review

In this section, we begin by defining the concept of "international parent" in relation to migrant parents. We then discuss the critical literature that explores culture in relation to parental involvement and address culturally responsive education. Finally, the focus of the review turns to the school leadership literature and its relation to and importance for diverse parents' involvement.

Defining International Parents

We focus on a subgroup of migrant parents, international families with school-aged children, and define international families as those who have temporarily migrated to the United States as the result of at least one parent's scholarly trajectory. While we recognize that the term "family" can represent a variety of structures and compositions (Sharma, 2013), the structure of international families in this study is shaped by the immigration rules for these families who are in the United States specifically for educational purposes and who have a cultural background different from that of the host country. As a result, each family in this study had at least one parent living in the United States as a visiting scholar or "international students . . . who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship or permanent residence in order to participate in international educational exchange as students, teachers, and researchers" (Paige, 1990, p. 162), or their spouses.

Literature focusing on culture and cultural diversity related to parental involvement often builds on the experiences of foreign-born parents with relatively less formal schooling than their white middle-class counterparts in the United States and focuses on how schools problematize their involvement with their children's education (e.g., Auerbach, 2007; García & de Guzmán, 2020; López et al., 2001). Here, we examine international families with at least one parent already having or pursuing a graduate

degree. While both immigrant and international parents share certain experiences and characteristics, there are also differences. This subgroup of parents is unique in that they have attained higher education degrees in their home country and may benefit from their past experiences with formal education in their home countries as they navigate their children's schooling in the United States. Additionally, unlike immigrant parents who have come to the United States with the intent to settle in the country, international parents intend to live in the country only temporarily, returning to their home countries upon completing their course of study or visiting scholar period.

Culture in Relation to Parental Involvement

Culture plays a pivotal role in how societies are organized and function. It affects the ways people behave, dress, and communicate. According to Lederach (1995), "Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them" (p. 9). It is "created, shared, and transformed by . . . people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity" (Nieto & Bode, 2018, p. 137). Culture as knowledge shared by and transferred within a group bestows the beholder with certain kinds of privileges that are only recognized when educators harness critical consciousness and self-awareness (Khalifa et al., 2016). The impact of privilege shows itself when there are "others" who are unfamiliar with the codes of that culture. Once people try to navigate their way in a culture other than their own, only then can they begin to understand its influence.

In schools, culture affects what educators view as legitimate involvement. This way, culture sets expectations for parents and determines whose involvement is valid. Schools in the United States tend to function from a perspective that recognizes white middle-class values as a default in many school-parent partnership efforts (Lareau, 1987; Noguera, 2001; Turney & Kao, 2009), and domination of one culture disproportionally benefits certain groups of parents while rendering their culture legitimate and more powerful than that of others (Delgado-Gaitán, 2012). Promoting inclusive parental involvement in diverse schools, however, requires educators to recognize this reality and understand that parental involvement is a culturally bound concept often drawing from middle-class, white American values (Delgado-Gaitán, 2012; Doucet, 2011). Because of this culturally bound perspective, certain parents enjoy a privilege while others try to decipher the ways in which the system works. As Delgado-Gaitán (2012) states, "How schools operate comprises a type of literacy that parents need to understand to successfully participate in their children's schooling" (p. 306); gaining more knowledge about the system gives parents more power to advocate for their children. By engaging in *culturally responsive practices*, schools can support all parents, increasing knowledge about the system to engage in schools more equitably.

Culturally Responsive Education

Culturally responsive education takes a strengths-based approach to diversity, framing it as an asset rather than a negative aspect. Cultural responsiveness can be understood as schools' efforts to

> use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and
> performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters

more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strength of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming. (Gay, 2002, p. 29).

Culturally responsive educators recognize and acknowledge that historically, schooling has been organized in ways that perpetuate inequities (Powell & Cantrell, 2021). They aim to disrupt the inequities present in the form of "Eurocentric mainstream standards and . . . an industrial model designed to assimilate students" (Powell & Cantrell, 2021, p. xvi). School leaders who are culturally responsive foster critical self-awareness, ensure that teacher preparation and curricula are culturally responsive, nurture inclusive school environments, and engage students and families in community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016). Enacting the various elements named above can "build capacity on issues of equity, diversity, and social justice" (A. López, 2015, p. 173). Educators engaging in culturally responsive practices promote a school culture that helps its members to view diversity in different and positive ways (Hernández et al., 2018).

School Leadership and Culturally Diverse Families

School leaders must act in socially just and culturally responsive ways to transform schools into engaging spaces for all parents and students from diverse backgrounds (A. López, 2015). Culturally responsive (CR) school leaders become "critical, reflective, purposeful, and fearless" to fight against injustices and create inclusive spaces for all in their schools (A. López, 2015, p. 171). Such leaders make deliberate efforts to empower communities by continuously centering them. By enacting care and reciprocal respect and promoting critical reflection and involvement, leaders' actions can foster communities' access to resources they previously did not have (Delgado-Gaitán, 2012). To achieve this goal, leaders constantly engage in ongoing critical reflection to recognize and move beyond their pre-established conceptualizations of diverse families and children and create opportunities for their staff to do the same (Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2007). Therefore, culturally responsive school leaders invest in the capacities of their school staff in ways that give them opportunities to recognize not only systemic issues, but also their own biases (Furman, 2012; A. López, 2015).

Just as adopting a CR model in classroom instruction can help educators improve the learning experiences of diverse students (Gay, 2002), creating CR schools for diverse parents can also help develop meaningful parental involvement opportunities for diverse families (Grant & Ray, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schools that seek to promote CR parental involvement need to "understand how to work with families in ethically and morally responsible ways" (Hernández et al., 2018, p. 79), and "see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 20). A culturally responsive school recognizes that cultural differences between schools and homes can explain why and how certain students and families are failed in schools (Hernández et al., 2018). Enacting parental involvement through a culturally responsive perspective, schools learn that partnership between home and schools should not necessarily focus on school-based issues (Gay, 2002). Rather, educators strive to prioritize the needs of the parents they serve (Auerbach, 2009, 2010; López et al., 2001) and work to transform communities into "a better place to live" (Johnson, 2006, p. 19). Instead of viewing

parents as passive recipients of expert educator wisdom, educators endeavor to become lifelong learners who "learn alongside children and families" (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006, p. 191) and consider parents resources (Powell & Cantrell, 2021). As lifelong learning advocates, it becomes crucial that educators get to know their parents and recognize their diverse cultures, values, strengths, and needs to use this knowledge to establish empowering relationships with families (Nissani & Singleton, 2010; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Method

To understand parents' experiences of participation and their interactions with their children's schools, we primarily focused on interviews with study participants. We also observed some school activities and reviewed related documents (e.g., calendars, newsletters, welcome documents). Employing purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015), we recruited parents by initially sending a recruitment email to the mailing list of families living in university housing. Additionally, we reached out to international parents they knew whose children attended Global Elementary School (GES, pseudonym), known for enrolling many children from families of international graduate students and visiting scholars. The criteria for inclusion in the study were: participants (1) all spoke a native language other than English, (2) had higher education degrees earned outside the United States, (3) were international scholars (graduate students or visiting scholars) or their spouses, and (4) had at least one child attending GES. Each participating family had one to two children at GES. We interviewed six participants from five households. Table 1, below, provides details regarding participants' countries of origin, language backgrounds, professional roles, and children.

GES was a suburban public school serving students from kindergarten to fifth grade. It was located near a research-intensive university with a large population of international students, Majestic University (MU, pseudonym). Based on data from MU's international office, about 15 percent of the overall student population on campus came from outside the United States, representing 130 nations. Many families came to Majestic's graduate programs, visiting scholar and teaching positions, and many enrolled their children in GES. As a result, over 16% of the students at GES spoke a language other than English. Reflective of the university's demographics, the elementary school enrolled a high number of international students and served families from approximately 45 countries. Also, the school website contained a translation feature, where parents could view the site in multiple languages.

Among its routines, GES had a daily morning ceremony where the school highlighted a different country each week. The principal had instituted the ceremony when she became the school leader. At the time of our study, the school's teachers had taken ownership of the ceremony. The school also had different events such as student author activities and movie nights to which parents were invited, held monthly parent meetings, and had a parent association. Additionally, the school had monthly newsletters, sent emails to parents, and had a presence on social media, such as a Facebook group and an app parents could access.

Table 1

Participants

Participant Name (pseudonym)	Country of Origin and Home Languages	Highest Educational Attainment Level & Profession	Role in United States	Children
Hakan*	Turkey – Turkish	Doctoral degree – Assistant professor at a university in Turkey	1-year, visiting scholar at Majestic University	Son, kindergarten
Yeliz*	Turkey – Turkish	Bachelor's degree – English as a second language teacher at a private middle school in Turkey	Came with her husband, not working in the United States.	Son, kindergarten
Ismaya	Indonesia – Indonesian	Master's degree (earned in United States) – Lecturer	Dual PhD student	Daughter, fifth grade; Son, kindergarten
Linda	Indonesia – Indonesian	Bachelor's degree – Housewife	Came with her husband (a PhD Student at Majestic University), not working in the United States.	Daughter, third grade; Daughter, kindergarten
Wati	Indonesia – Indonesian	Master's degree (earned in United States) – Lecturer	PhD student	Daughter, fourth grade; Son, first grade

Participant Name (pseudonym)	Country of Origin and Home Languages	Highest Educational Attainment Level & Profession	Role in United States	Children
Hanit	Nepal – Toteeli, Nepali, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi	Master's degrees (earned in Nepal and in United States) – Educator	PhD student	Son, kindergarten; Daughter, high school

* Hakan and Yeliz were one couple; both parents interviewed together.

In-depth interviews with parents are the main data source for this study. Employing cognitive pretesting (Fowler, 2014) prior to conducting interviews, we piloted questions to see if potential respondents would understand and could answer the questions. The interview protocol (see Appendix) was designed to gain insights about families' backgrounds and their perceptions about education, including their definitions of education, their aspirations for their children, and involvement in their children's education. They also shared their perspectives on parental involvement in their home countries. For this study, we focused on aspects of the protocol related to how study participants were involved in and engaged with GES. Within this subsection of the protocol, we asked about ways the school and parents communicated and how parents were engaged by the school. We asked about parents' interactions with school administration, teachers, and staff and how the school got to know them. We conducted interviews that ranged in duration from almost half-an-hour to close to two hours, in English or in parents' native languages. Multilingual interviewing was possible because of team members' multiple language skills. All interviewees signed consent forms and were informed that they could stop the interview or skip questions with no consequence to them.

We transcribed interviews, translating them where necessary, so all interviews were accessible to all research team members. To promote trustworthiness, at least two of the three researchers read and coded each interview transcript (Saldaña, 2012). We first analyzed the data by using open coding, followed by coding the data as reflected in characteristics identified in the literature (Charmaz, 2000). Research team members completed an analytic matrix reflecting aspects identified in the literature. The matrix served to track patterns observed in the data related to key concepts in the related literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Elements include: serving culturally and linguistically diverse families; recognizing families' strengths and honoring their cultural values; connecting in community contexts; building inclusive and welcoming school environments; attending to families' needs and providing platforms to be heard; and embedding culturally responsive approaches in the school. We then discussed our coding and interpretations of the data, as well as patterns observed in the data, and identified main themes.

When we conducted the study in 2017 and 2018, we were MU doctoral students in a K-12 educational leadership program. Two team members were international students from Indonesia and Turkey. One team member is first-generation U.S.-born, with her family coming from Colombia, and having grown up on the East Coast. All the team members have backgrounds working in K-12 schools; two of us were teachers, and one was a counselor. The second and third authors had shared experiences with participants as members of international families who were also graduate students. Given our own cultural backgrounds of being from minoritized groups in the United States and having scholarly preparation in family involvement, the team members apply a critical lens toward educational leadership and how schools may more effectively engage families.

Findings

While examining the experiences of these international parents as they tried to engage their children's education in a U.S. school, our analysis yielded two main themes: parental involvement as a process of adaptation and engaging in decision-making: "It's not for us." Our first theme, consisting of four sub-themes, suggests that parental involvement occurred as a process of discovery and adaptation into a new school system for these parents and we highlight factors affecting their adaptation. The second theme explains parents' experiences with school decision-making and underlines difficulties encountered in this matter.

Parental Involvement as a Process of Adaptation

For the parents who participated in this study, parental involvement was a process of adaptation in which they gradually discovered a new school system, the opportunities available for their involvement, and educators' expectations in this regard. When these parents first stepped into GES, they did not know the school system, the way it functioned, or the roles they were supposed to fulfill in the school as parents. As they often stated, the school systems in their home countries were in contrast to what they experienced at GES.

Ismaya, who had come to the United States from Indonesia to study curriculum and educational policy as a doctoral student, stressed that "I think it is different, in Indonesia, culturally and historically, schools are part of the government rather than part of the community." Despite this kind of difference, parents attempted to navigate their way based on knowledge and experience of their home country schooling systems and slowly learned the system at GES. As they learned about this system and its expectations for them as parents, they used their education as a resource and benefited from the welcoming school environment and relationships they formed with other parents and school staff.

Parents thought that, compared with the schools in their home countries, this new school system presented them with rich involvement opportunities. Through its open-door policy, numerous events, and multiple communication channels, GES provided these parents with an environment where they could be involved in their children's education beyond what they had in their home countries. Yet, the sheer existence of these opportunities did not guarantee parents' involvement, because to tap

into opportunities, parents first needed to explore them and learn how they worked. Therefore, parents first had to discover this new system and its resources and then needed to get comfortable with accessing them. The parent involvement venture was an ongoing process in which parents constantly learned something new about the system.

Learning about resources and how they worked took parents months and sometimes almost an entire school year. For instance, it took Yeliz, the wife of a visiting scholar, several months to realize that she could volunteer in the classroom. She finally learned about this possibility from another international mother who also happened to be her neighbor. This mother told Yeliz that she attended her son's classes and that parents were allowed in classrooms. Prior to receiving this information, given her experience in Turkey, Yeliz didn't even consider the possibility of parents volunteering in classrooms. Yeliz noted that being in the classroom with her son early on would have been helpful since her son did not speak any English upon his arrival. All the parents in our study shared that schools in their home countries follow much stricter policies regarding parents' presence in schools.

Linda, an Indonesian mother, commented that her daughter's school in Indonesia "discourage [*sic*] parents from going to school," believing that parents would "spoil the children" by doing so. Discovering that teachers at GES were ready to accept parents into their classrooms and were willing to listen to them, Linda and other parents in this study appreciated this aspect of the new school system. Based on her experience in GES, Linda elaborated that "what I like about the schools here in the U.S. is that we can involve [*sic*] in almost all activities and events." Like Linda, Yeliz commented that the school did "a great job by being open to parents all the time." She described how she spent time at GES: "Most of the time, I go during lunchtime, and I stay for recess, and we spent time with the kids as well because they are happy when they see me, and I always keep an eye on them." These examples show that as parents acquired more and more knowledge about the system, they became more involved.

Some formal activities were relatively easier to participate in for the parents. GES organized events for parents to become involved and volunteer in the school. Although announcing these opportunities through phone calls, texting, fliers, Facebook, and the school website made it easier for parents to be aware of them, they still had to decipher the expectations for engaging in these activities. When Hanit, a doctoral student in language studies and mother of a kindergartener, accompanied her son Badri to the school's movie night, she "felt bad not to be as engaged as other parents who brought pillows and blankets." While wanting to have her son take part in the activity, she did not know that bringing these items was part of how members of the school community participated.

Once informed, these international parents sought to become involved in these activities. Attending these school events, parents interacted with their own as well as other parents' children, helped teachers run these events, and sometimes socialized with other parents. Overall, the parents were satisfied with the number and variety of events they were invited to participate in and volunteer for, but it appeared that GES mostly assumed parents already knew about these opportunities and how to take part in them. Because of these assumptions, parents were left on their own to figure out

parental involvement at GES. For some parents, GES' failure to provide more of an orientation was just a small "communication problem," but the school's lack of intentionality did result in barriers to fuller engagement. In speaking with parents, however, we identified some key resources that helped these parents during this discovery venture of adapting to a new system.

The Power of Recognizing Diversity and Fostering a Welcoming School Environment

Parents welcomed the school's invitations to attend school events, volunteer in school, and engage in conversations about their children. They all mentioned and appreciated the school's multicultural morning ceremony, which was strongly embedded in the school's daily routine and signaled to parents that GES recognized and valued diversity. Along with other visible signals of welcome, including a prominent "welcome" sign in multiple languages, this daily activity demonstrated the recognition of multiple nations coming together within the school. The daily morning activity included reciting the pledge of allegiance, announcements, and greetings among the "school family," recognizing birthdays, and weekly learning about a different country. Linda, who referred to this activity as her "favorite," noted, "We are lucky to have students, like, from around 40 countries'' in the school, and she felt that the "school also engage[s] all students and parents from all cultural backgrounds [*sic*] to any school activities." She described how "they talk about one country . . . about its people, its culture, its traditions, its music." Ismaya, who had a fifth-grade daughter at the school, also spoke of the importance of seeing diversity recognized at GES. He described the school as consisting of "40 or 60 countries [and the school was] celebrating their origins. That is something I highly value, celebrating uniqueness, humanity values." This long-standing activity was reflective of the school's welcoming environment for all and of diversity being valued.

Another way parents felt their cultures were included and valued was when educators recognized their cultural characteristics, such as their native language, in a positive way. Hakan and Yeliz, a Turkish couple, indicated that their son Ali's kindergarten teacher supported the use of Turkish and Ali's interest in his family's native country. They both referred to GES as "the international school" because it was so close to the local university, and it had a large international population. These parents shared that Ali's "English teacher" encouraged them to continue speaking Turkish with him. According to Yeliz, Ali's teacher assured them by saying, "If someone's mother tongue is strong . . . this person can learn another language easily. So, first of all, the mother tongue should be really strong." This teacher's emphasis on the positive influence their home language would have on Ali's development of English reflected the teacher's understanding of language development and valued an important aspect of the family's culture. Additionally, when Ali's class had a writing project culminating in an activity to which parents were invited, Ali chose to write about Turkey. The classroom teacher shared with them that their son was "so proud of his country. . . . He likes Turkey a lot." Hakan and Yeliz believed that the "school helped a lot" in adapting to the new system of schooling and that the school "help[ed] the kids adapt . . . easily." Hakan and Yeliz viewed the way Ali's teacher suggested maintaining

their family's home language and fostering his interest in Turkey as ways the new school system supported their child's adaptation.

Similarly, Wati, a doctoral student from Indonesia and a mother of two children, appreciated the effort the school gave in supporting the transition process for the students and parents when she said, "We come from very different cultures; they might not know our culture, but for the interaction I think that they respect our culture." Wati shared that she was invited to the school and received help regarding her family's "transition to the school cultures." She felt that not only the teachers, [but also] the school principal, and the school adviser were helpful," understanding and respectful of her third-grade daughter, Ayu. For example, during the first few months at GES Ayu refused to sit on the floor, since this was an unfamiliar and even odd thing to do for her. As Ayu was reluctant, Wati interpreted the school's response as compassionate and respectful, waiting for the child to get used to her new environment. All these experiences eased the parents' transition into this new school environment.

The Importance of Connecting with other Parents

Almost all study participants, with one exception, lived in housing facilities for Majestic University affiliates. Living in university housing, some of them became neighbors with other scholar parents. In fact, in addition to all the communication channels that were in place at GES, parents indicated that they heard and learned a great deal by communicating with other parents. Through interactions with one another in the neighborhood, they learned key information about how the system worked in the United States and how they could support their children in this new environment.

Yeliz shared how she learned about a computer application used in the school: "It's a really good application, but they forgot to tell us this. I have just learned it [*sic*] a week ago from another parent." At the time she stated this, the school year was almost over. Even some fundamental information resources, such as the school Facebook page, were a mystery to these parents at first. Again, Yeliz shared that she heard one of her neighbors, another international parent, talking about a school concert on Christmas day that she was not aware of. Once she inquired, she learned that the event information was posted on the school Facebook group and that was how she finally learned about this resource. Unfortunately, the event was over when Yeliz heard about it, but thanks to the exchanges regarding the concert, she was able to discover this readily available source of information. Just as she had learned from another mother that she could go into her son's class and that there was a reading app she would have found so valuable, had she not had these interactions with other parents, she might not have ever known; the school did not formally address these.

Ismaya and Linda both named bus drop-off and pickup as key occasions to engage with other parents, both international and domestic. Linda shared that her family interacted with other parents "every time we take the kids to the bus and pick them up from the bus stop. Yes, I interact a lot with other parents." This simple daily ritual provided an opportunity for repeated informal contact among parents, during which they exchanged information and developed relationships.

The Importance of Connecting with School Staff

Interviews highlighted the importance of school staff, in addition to faculty, in developing an inclusive and welcoming school culture and adjusting to the new school system. Various school staff members were key in helping parents to navigate the system and support their children's acclimation to their new setting and routines. At times, these personnel even assisted families with matters not directly related to school issues, such as helping obtain a dental appointment. Being welcomed by a supportive school staff appeared to be important for these families in their transition. Parents identified the school secretary, a lunch aide, the school chef, a custodian, and a school bus driver as people they found helpful or with whom they had built relationships.

When asked about key personnel with whom they interacted, almost all participants named the school secretary and described her in a positive manner. Linda felt that one aspect that made the school "so welcoming" was that the person at "the front desk even knows my name." Hanit found the secretary to be "warm" and to have a demeanor that went beyond one-word answers. Aligned with other parents, Yeliz and Hakan stated that they were filled with questions and were extremely nervous as they walked into the school for the first time, but that their fear and anxiety vanished as they met and were welcomed by the school secretary. When asked about how she felt going into the school's office, Wati said that she felt "welcome[d] every time I go to the school." These examples show that, as the families were entering an unfamiliar space, the GES school secretary played an instrumental role helping them establish a positive first contact and foster a welcoming feeling in their new environment.

Other personnel parents highlighted were the school cafeteria staff, who were critical since school meals had been a concern for several of the parents. Linda shared, "We are Muslim, so we were worried about the food, but we were surprised knowing that the head chef is Muslim and wearing the headscarf." The presence of a chef who was also Muslim allayed Linda's concerns because she believed that this person would understand her child's dietary needs. Hanit was grateful that the lunch monitor could communicate with her son Badri in Urdu or Hindi. The monitor could help ensure that Badri was eating when her son was reluctant to go to the lunchroom early on, since he did not know the names of food items.

Although the diversity of staff was important, their attitude was also critical. Yeliz found everyone at the school, including other parents, to be "nice and . . . so friendly," which in turn eased their worries and helped them get "relaxed." Hakan told about how he and his wife saw a school janitor stop mopping the gym to help a little girl find someone she was looking for. This instance "impressed" Hakan "very much" because, as he put it, "we don't see much of this kind of an approach in our own country. . . ." He felt this example was indicative of the kindness and respect he had seen across the school. These kinds of accommodating gestures from the school secretary, janitor, and other staff helped these parents feel safe and reassured at GES, which led them to feel comfortable in this new system. Beyond the physical school building, Linda found a sense of connection with the bus driver on her children's route. She noted that her family "in some occasions [sic] . . . exchange gifts with the bus driver." The bus routine connected parents with staff and with other parents.

Comforting interactions with different members of the school community helped to promote these parents' adjustment into the new world they faced. Instances when parents could speak with others who could understand them and were open to aiding them were appreciated. These occasions helped parents navigate challenges they encountered as their children attended GES. Parents' naming of non-faculty school staff points to the importance of all staff in the school community playing a role in the school's welcoming tone.

Parents' Educational Backgrounds and Language Skills in Navigating U.S. Schooling

Our study found that parents' educational backgrounds and English proficiency served as useful resources, helping them acquire more knowledge of the system and navigate their way. As mentioned above, study participants all agreed that what they experienced as parental involvement at GES was different from what was expected in their home countries. They found GES open to parents. Yet, this new system was a mystery to them when they first arrived. They navigated this new system by collecting bits of information through school resources (e.g., newsletters, text messages, school website, school Facebook page) and other parents. As they went through this experience, parents' educational backgrounds and language skills helped them maneuver through GES and adapt to the new parental involvement expectations of U.S. schooling.

These parents' educational backgrounds provided them with a knowledge base that empowered them when interacting with the school. For example, when Ismaya talked about his relationship with the educators at GES, he stated that "[my] education background [made me] comfortable speaking to teachers and administrators; I could appreciate what they are doing [because he had knowledge of the field]. Those factors made me comfortable." Ismaya said that his experience in the field of education, along with time in another U.S. city prior to attending Majestic University, aided him in feeling more comfortable navigating GES when his daughter attended the school.

Other parents also indicated that their own professional and academic backgrounds fostered their ability to engage with their children's school and to navigate potential difficulties. For instance, Hanit prevented her son's premature placement in speech services, "thankfully," through her knowledge of linguistics. She provided an alternative explanation to her son's teacher for why he could not pronounce certain words. She negotiated with the teacher to give her son's lost baby teeth some time to grow in and then revisit the referral if necessary. Hanit commented that she appreciated that in the United States, there is opportunity for discussion, and parental permission is required, acknowledging that in Nepal Badri would have been placed without discussion. This approach gave her the opportunity to inform the school about circumstances they had not considered.

Those who felt comfortable about their English ability were more confident about interacting with educators. Therefore, parents' English proficiency was critical in enabling their involvement in school activities. Ismaya stated that while he was comfortable communicating with teachers, his wife, who had less English proficiency, engaged less with the school directly and preferred email communication, because she

could read and reread messages. Similarly, Yeliz had more direct communication with the school than her husband, who had less English proficiency than she did. Also, during school events we attended, we observed that parents who did not speak English mainly observed activities but did not interact much with other attendees. As participants explained, GES did not provide translation help for these parents.

Only a few parents per classroom had difficulty understanding basic English, as suggested by Yeliz, but understanding certain terminology was an issue for most study participants, regardless of proficiency. Technical language used at certain occasions posed a challenge for parents. For example, school board meetings appeared difficult to follow. Even if they tried, the technical jargon used in these meetings was challenging, and they felt as if "another language" was being spoken.

These findings suggest that parents' English proficiency and educational background affected their ability to learn about this new system, navigate it, and tap into school resources available. However, even those international parents who possessed higher education degrees and were proficient in English had difficulty finding their way in curricular and more formal meetings and engaging in school decision-making processes.

Engaging in Decision-Making: "It's not for us"

These parents found the involvement opportunities at GES quite generous compared with those in their home countries' schools. In fact, they often talked positively about the diverse involvement avenues the school offered them. They tried to learn these as much as possible and to adapt to this new system without feeling the burden of historical discrimination and marginalization diverse parents have experienced in U.S. schooling (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Yet, they were particularly attentive to the calls directly related to their own children while being hesitant to attend meetings and activities where general school matters were discussed. Even when they did attend, they chose to observe while trying to understand what was happening. As one parent stated,

> I don't attend general school meetings. Cause I don't know this system well and how it works. We go to all classroom meetings or events, but not to the school board meetings. It's not for us, I think. I dropped by one of these once and I think they were talking about the school budget or something, but I couldn't understand what they were talking about really. It was like another language to me.

Aligned with this comment, Wati explained that "there is a parent-teacher meeting, [but I am] not so much into policy, because usually that's for U.S.A. citizens. It's for some of their parents." They felt that attending these meetings and engaging in school policy discussions were not for international parents.

Since the concept of local school governance was new to these parents, they had difficulty understanding and considering their roles as active partners on such occasions. Comparing his country with the United States, Ismaya reported that "parents did not play a major role until lately" in Indonesian education. Although he believed the orientation was changing and parents were given more responsibilities in Indonesian

schools, that was not "in terms of programs and making decisions in schools," since the "public schools are government directed," meaning that decisions are made by the central administration and carried out by educators at schools. Being unfamiliar with decision-making processes and raising their voices in their home countries' schools, these parents did not indicate the need to consider the ways in which they could make their voices heard in GES.

Besides being unfamiliar with the concept of parental involvement in decision-making processes, they also felt detached from the formal language spoken in these general meetings. Linda, who volunteered at various school activities and "interact[ed] with so many parents," believed that the school could improve how it relates academic topics to parents. She stated, "Perhaps, the school needs to explain clearly about some terms which are difficult, such as in curriculum meeting[s], I am not really familiar with some terms in the curriculum, so I only attended the meeting once or twice." She also noted that while some groups of international parents were very active in activities, others "never come to the meeting[s]."

Overall, findings suggest that international parents tried their best to learn about the system and benefited from various resources while doing so. Yet, despite their efforts, they did not feel that they belonged in decision-making circles.

Discussion

This study contributes to an understanding of the experiences of international parents as they enter a U.S. school system through their children's attendance in a school known for serving international families. The parents had extensive experiences with formal schooling in their home countries and had all completed at least one higher education degree. However, without knowledge of parental involvement expectations or permitted forms of involvement in the United States, these parents were left to discover parental involvement conventions in their children's school. They often learned of opportunities informally through contact with other parents. School personnel with whom they engaged were critical in supporting their adjustment to the new school system, and the language and professional skills they brought with them also influenced how they interacted with school personnel. While parents accepted invitations to volunteer, they were less involved in attending school meetings or engaging in decision-making because they did not understand terms used or felt that involvement in policy was not for them.

The idea of engaging all parents in their children's education is appealing but also challenging for schools. In fact, the very efforts schools make to support this goal could yield some adverse effects on some parents' involvement (Ishimaru, 2019). Extant research shows that conventional ways schools try to promote parental involvement can privilege certain groups while marginalizing others (Auerbach, 2007; Boutte & Johnson, 2013; Lareau, 1987), and migrant parents can be one of the most vulnerable groups in this regard (Auerbach, 2007; López et al., 2001). As pointed out earlier in this article, there is a growing body of literature focused on this matter, but the work often centers on parents and schools that confront serious social and economic disadvantages. Families in such contexts often lack access to decent job opportunities, health provision, and safe living spaces (e.g., DeMatthews et al., 2016;

García & de Guzmán, 2020; López et al., 2001). In contrast to these studies, we focus on a subgroup of migrant parents who came to the United States for a limited time, often for one to six years, as scholars at a prestigious university or as their family members, and we examined their parental involvement experiences in an elementary school that was considered a top 50 elementary school in the state (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2021).

Our findings show that GES provided parents with a welcoming environment and rich school-centric involvement opportunities. Although the parents were initially unaware of these opportunities, they slowly learned about some of the involvement expectations and opportunities in the school. The more parents learned about the different ways they could support their children's schooling, the more they appreciated the new system and the opportunities available to them. Although this sense of welcome was attractive, we argue that this could be misleading both for school communities and for researchers. From a critical perspective, there are two issues that we highlight in an effort to promote inclusive school cultures for all parents.

First, parents experienced parental involvement as a process of adaptation that was initiated and upheld by the parents. Large differences existed between the international parents' home countries regarding how they engaged in their children's education, how schools and families partnered with schools, and how the system worked overall. Since GES assumed that parents would know "the rules of the game," which were predefined and imposed by the school (Dahlstedt, 2009, p. 201), parents did not receive much intentional help from educators. As a result, the discovery of this new system was a parent-initiated process, the responsibility of which rested on families' shoulders.

Our findings support a growing counter discourse arguing that schools need to take proactive roles in engaging diverse parents and promoting their empowerment by building parents' capacities and the knowledge necessary truly to be school community members (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Gedik, 2021), rather than expecting parents to know the rules and the expectations. Literature suggests that when educators rely on school-centric, one-size-fits-all definitions and conceptualize parental involvement as a responsibility of parents, they often fail to engage those "parents who, in fact, need school partnership the most" (Gedik, 2021, p. 286). Therefore, schools need to assume the responsibility to pave the path for parents. Once they learn how the school system is structured and have a raised critical awareness about its implications, then parents can experience authentic engagement and school-family partnerships can go beyond conventional "mandates for collaboration" that are "geared toward narrow school agendas" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 728). Instead, these partnerships will reflect the families and communities the schools serve. Our findings suggest that without intentionality on the school's part, parents who are unfamiliar with U.S. schooling will have to take a long and circuitous journey to discover this new land all by themselves.

Previous research is clear on the impact of parents' educational backgrounds and language proficiency on their involvement with their children's education (Bellibas & Gumuz, 2013; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau, 1987). Aligned with these findings, our study reveals the role that language proficiency played in the way that parents

interacted with the school. Additionally, we found that the mode of communication used by schools could help to support the way parents process information. Parents with more English proficiency felt more prepared to engage directly with school personnel. For parents with less English proficiency, being able to reread emails supported their understanding of school communications. Including multilingual resources such as interpreters would provide additional support for parents. It is important to note, also, that even for parents who were comfortable in English, curricular jargon and educational terms that were new to parents also were a barrier to parental involvement.

Further, our study highlights the importance of relationships in both helping families adjust to the new school system and in learning about various ways of being involved. The families appreciated and were comforted by the help they received in navigating both school and non-school-related issues. Their worries were also put to rest as they saw school personnel whom they believed understood their needs, such as food options that aligned with their religious observances. Also important to these parents was the contact they had with other parents. As participants noted, even short interactions such as bus drop-off and pick-up times served as information-exchange opportunities.

Schools should consider the importance of the interactions parents have with both school personnel and with other parents. They can ensure that those hired in the school engage parents in a warm and helpful manner and that onboarding of new hires as well as ongoing development opportunities include addressing the needs of different groups of parents, including international parents. In terms of parent-to-parent relations, schools can promote interactions among parents overall and consider the different places parents might interact with one another, rather than solely centering the school building for interactions (Gil & Johnson, 2021; Jasis, 2019). Finally, when schools want to address international parents, they can engage parents who have been in the school longer and ask them what information they believe is important for parents newer to the school. Given that no parents named the welcome document for families as a resource they used, we wonder if parents in our study did not know about this resource, or if they did not find the resource as useful as it could have been.

Secondly, while parents were able to comply with some of the conventional expectations that the school held for them, their involvement did not extend to the school decision-making processes. When it came to attending the meetings where important decisions were made, some believed that these meetings were "usually . . . for U.S.A. citizens." Literature suggests that migrant parents may not be aware of the opportunities or may lack the confidence to speak up to school administrators on their children's behalf (Yakhnich, 2016), or they could be avoiding active advocacy and decision-making actions, simply because they don't know if they can (Sibley & Dearing, 2014). Previous literature tends to tie this problem to the parents' lack of resources and skills and implies that schools need to set aside their own agendas and prioritize the needs of these families "above all other involvement considerations" (López et al., 2001, p. 253).

Despite their educational backgrounds and other resources, these parents still felt alien in school meetings, believing that it was not their place to engage in the decision-making processes of the school. Even when they attended meetings, they could not understand the terminology used in these gatherings and felt like outsiders there. Therefore, once again, our findings suggest that parental voice in the decision-making process requires more than just organizing meetings. It, in fact, requires a proactive school leadership that is ready to empower parents, rather than assuming that schools are neutral and open to every parent in the same way (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Gedik, 2021). Schools should not presume that parents know the system and should actively take the lead to inform them about its "whats" and "hows." This is critical, because even when diverse parents come to the U.S. equipped with some of the resources valued in schools, they could still be marginalized from vital parental involvement roles.

Parents in this study were open to supporting their children's education through involvement in the opportunities offered by the school. When they felt it necessary, these international parents took the initiative to interpret their children's actions or circumstances for school personnel. This response of parents who were concerned about how their children might be viewed is documented by previous research (e.g., Isik-Ercan, 2010). Some parents may take the step to initiate this type of information sharing, especially in response to an incident or to clarify a misunderstanding. Rather than wait for parents to take the first step, however, school leaders can encourage their staff members to invite parents to share any additional background information that might help school personnel to contextualize situations. Engaging in dialogue with parents (Day, 2012) can help educators to understand students' and families' perspectives as well as provide information about expectations and explanations about school norms and activities.

This kind of exchange is essential because international parents may be accustomed to school systems less oriented toward inviting parents into schools or not encouraging parents to share. As previous research has found that more communication leads to greater cultural understanding (Isik-Ercan, 2010), it is crucial that schools engage in communication with the intention to hear from and learn about parents. To learn alongside parents, schools need to make sure that every family group gets enough opportunity to raise their voice and share "their thinking and understanding about their children's and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school" (McKenna & Millen, 2013, p. 12). This may include not only their "desires, dreams, goals, and hopes for their children," but also "frustration, concern, or anger over isolation, exclusion, or disrespect within the educational process" (McKenna & Millen, 2013, p. 12). Without this intentionality and taking a learner stance, schools may not fully actualize authentic engagement even when they make efforts to promote a sense of welcome for families.

Conclusion

As this study demonstrates, international parents at GES welcomed opportunities to be involved in their children's school. While educational attainment has been cited as an important factor in parental involvement levels, we found that there were other factors that influenced how parents were involved and what

relationships they had with the school, including those related to culture and language. Parents experienced both positive and concerning experiences at the school. A growing body of literature suggests that one-size-fits-all parental involvement models won't be successful, especially in diverse contexts, even when all families are highly educated and have access to quality education. Along with other extant research, our findings support that parental involvement in children's lives "is fluid, robust, and specific to context and culture" (McKenna & Millen, 2013, p. 9). In order to involve all parents, schools need to embrace emphasizing the importance of diversity and context and work to improve their cultural responsiveness.

In creating an all-inclusive school culture, educational leaders and all members of the school community should understand that no school ever reaches an "endpoint" of cultural responsiveness (Khalifa, 2018). Culturally responsive family engagement requires educators not to work from a deficit orientation (Valencia, 2002) but instead to assume responsibility and "ownership" for building relationships (Auerbach, 2009), emphasizing constant reflection on the part of the school leader and all faculty and staff. All members of the school community should ask themselves if they are serving and valuing all people within the school.

While educational leaders may not be able to mitigate all issues faced by international families, the school practices established can influence whether families and students feel included and can shape how families and students are supported and seen as an important part of the school community. Parents notice the visible signs of welcome and valuing of diversity, and these send positive messages regarding their presence in the school. Principals' staffing decisions can influence the tone of the school, can affect the way parents engage within the school, and can shape how they adjust to the school setting. Leaders can also consider what values may undergird their own beliefs, including those about schooling and participation, and consider perspectives outside of their own. Understanding families' contexts and cultures deeply, including what skills, knowledge, and talents parents might share, can strengthen their inclusion within the school community. Reinforcing parental networks and providing tools for navigating school systems are also important in helping families to become more truly connected to schools in a positive way.

Last but not least, when working with diverse parents, schools need to go beyond the school-centric parental engagement approaches that often emphasize school-based practices related to school-centric objectives set by the school alone. By seeking to learn about the cultures, values, strengths, and needs of families, school leaders, faculty, and staff establish empowering relationships with them (Ishimaru, 2019; Khalifa, 2012). Rather than trying to educate parents so that they can meet the school's expectations, social justice leaders strive for community-centered ways to reach out to and work with their constituent communities.

As our study indicates, there is much that can be learned by directly hearing from international parents regarding their experiences with their children's schools. Given that the United States continues its tradition of having over a million international students and visiting scholars on its university campuses annually, there is a great opportunity for future research to learn more deeply from these parents. A

mixed methods study involving more international parents from different schools near other U.S. universities could provide a broader picture of these parents' experiences. The knowledge garnered from such a study could help K-12 schools to understand more about families' strengths, as well as their needs. Findings could also offer information to schools about practices, including those that are culturally responsive and inclusive and those that better support international families who are engaged with both K-12 and post-secondary school systems.

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End Notes

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Appendix

Parent Interview Questions

The interview protocol was designed to gain insights about families' backgrounds and their perceptions about education, and involvement in their children's education, including parental involvement in their home countries. We also asked study participants about their involvement and engagement at their children's schools to learn about their interactions with school personnel and how they were engaged by the school. Questions included:

- Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- Who in your family is going to elementary school here in the United States?
- How do you define education?
- How important do you think your contribution is for your child's education?
- How do you support your child's education?
- How are parents expected to be involved in their children's education in your home country?
- How often do you have communication with the school?
- Does the school try to engage you in school activities? Please explain.
- Do you interact with other parents whose children attend this school or other schools?
- Are there other ways that you learn about what is going on with the school?
- How do you feel when you enter the school/go to the school's front office?
- Are there other key personnel/staff with whom you have interaction?
- Have you experienced any challenges regarding your involvement in activities initiated by the school? Please explain.
- Was the challenge resolved/addressed? If so, how?
- What is the school doing that helps you get involved in your child's education?