

Schools Reading Parents' Worlds

Mexican Immigrant Mothers

Building Family Literacy Networks

Alice A. Miano

Introduction

As noted by researchers, a good deal of literature about parental involvement unfairly characterizes Latino parents as “uninvolved” or “less involved” in their children’s education in comparison to their European-American counterparts (e.g., López & Stoelting, 2010; Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdés, 1996). In a comparable fashion, studies of similarly marginalized, low-income parents tend to claim that these parents are less involved than those of the middle class (cf. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991), and, likewise, that more formally educated parents are more involved with their children’s education than parents with less formal education (cf. Dauber & Epstein 2001/1995; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap & Epstein, 1995).

Frequently, however, studies that point to the supposed failings of marginalized parents neglect to overtly define the very trend they claim to measure—that of parental participation—and instead rely on assumptions that highlight only middle class parental practices (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Fine, 1993; Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001; Lareau, 1994, 1996, 2000). An unfortunate byproduct of this trend has been an unwitting engagement in mythmaking, a form of stereotyping projected largely upon racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, or otherwise societally marginalized parents based on a presumption of deficit (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valdés, 1996).

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At the same time, a tendency persists in some parent involvement research to beg the question, to tacitly base perceptions of effective parent involvement upon the educational background and sociocultural practices of the privileged, and then to assume that this background necessarily begets better-equipped parents and thus better-prepared children (de Carvalho, 2001). Dauber and Epstein’s (2001) conclusion, for instance, that “parents who are better educated are more involved at school and at home than parents who are less educated” (p. 211), stems from such circular reasoning.

Because formal education has so far been preferentially accessible to the European-American middle class, such statements privilege this group at the expense of others, with the unfortunate effect of casting prejudice upon many of the marginalized parents whom the parent involvement literature commendably wishes to address. The aim of this article, then, is to make visible many ways in which a group of parents of marginalized status participate in their children’s schooling and to reveal something of the societal machinery that can render invisible many admirable parental efforts.

The Parent Involvement Literature

Adapting somewhat the analysis of Graue et al. (2001), I outline three strands within the literature on parent involvement. First, the parent involvement literature’s *prescriptive strand* (e.g., Dauber & Epstein, 2001/1995; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1994, 1996, 2001; Epstein et al., 2002; Swap, 1993), largely dedicated to advising teachers on how to work with parents, is prominently centered on the perspective of the affluent, European-American middle class and highly influenced, in turn, by the deficit thinking

outlined above (de Carvalho, 2001; Graue et al., 2001; Lareau, 1996, 2000, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996).

This literature has mainly functioned as a provider of “to do” lists for parents (e.g., parents must provide a quiet, well-lit place to study; review children’s homework; attend open houses and parent-teacher conferences; and join school booster organizations), assuming in tandem that all parents possess the resources to perform these duties. Teachers, for their part, are told to provide “clear information” to parents, without considering the relative nature of such a request (Epstein, 2001, p. 14). Lopsidedly focused on parental performance, this literature has assumed that parents should serve schools but not necessarily vice versa.

A second, *quantitative strand* (e.g., Jeynes, 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Rumberger et al., 1990; Snow et al., 1991; Yan & Lin, 2005), with some notable exceptions (e.g., Domina, 2005; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996) has tended to espouse the assumptions of the prescriptive literature, seeking to isolate and quantify certain variables in order to predict which parent behaviors or cultural traits (frequently the European-American middle class behaviors promoted in the prescriptive literature) yield the most effective results in children’s academic achievement.

As in the prescriptive literature, a reliance on predetermined variables and assumptions inevitably leads to foregone conclusions, as when Rumberger and colleagues (1990) claim that “parents in high SES families are more likely than parents in low SES families to be involved in their children’s education” (p. 284), even when their data on high school dropouts admittedly provide no such indication.

Finally, an *interpretive strand*, consisting of ethnographic and other qualita-

tive studies, has sought to bring to light parents' actual practices and perspectives. Much of this literature (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; Fine, 1993; Graue, et al., 2001; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; López, 2001; Reay, 1998; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996) has provided critical perspectives and challenged the first two strands, pointing out unacknowledged, underlying assumptions and normative constructions (Graue et al. 2001; Reay, 1998) of the ideal parent, which limit definitions of parent involvement and confound the conclusions of prescriptive approaches and of many quantitative studies (Lareau, 2001).

Such assumptions center around unacknowledged power differentials that relate primarily to race, class, gender, ethnicity, immigration status, language and literacy use, and other cultural practices. Rather than assuming definitions or engaging in stereotyping, deficit thinking, or mythmaking, qualitative studies have tended to look to parents for definitions and answers.

This article seeks to contribute to this tradition of qualitative research, to move beyond myths and get to the *mamás*, delving into the mothers' life histories to see how, in a Bakhtinian (1981) sense, the mothers' past experiences have influenced their current beliefs and practices surrounding their children's schooling. It is important to note that, as part of the societal mythmaking process, Latinos referred to in the literature may frequently appear lumped together as a single community despite racial, ethnic, cultural, generational, socioeconomic, linguistic, and other forms of diversity that defy essentialization (Zentella, 2005). As such, it bears noting that the subjects in this study represent a specific demographic: they are virtually all first-generation Mexican immigrant families with just a handful of second-generation U.S.-born children.

Even so, as we shall see below, among the first-generation Mexican immigrant mothers who served as focal parents, there was a great deal of diversity, including urban versus rural background, age, number of years in the U.S., and access to formal education and to print literacy. Additionally, in focusing on the mothers' life histories here, it is beyond the scope of this study to detect whether children's achievement improves because of parent involvement. Instead, this study asks:

- ◆ How do schools and parents reach out to each other?
- ◆ How do participant parents seek to support their children's education?

- ◆ How do school officials view parental efforts?

Theoretical Framework

Bakhtin (1981) provides the cornerstone that guided this research, as his work points to the social, cultural, and historical trajectories that shape individuals' thoughts and actions. Although Bakhtinian theory centers on novelistic discourse, many ethnographic studies apply his theory as a metaphor for human discourse, activity, and identity, and the sociocultural understanding that motivates and undergirds these aspects of human interaction (e.g., Dyson, 1993, 1997; Graue et al., 2001; Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998; Hull & Zacher, 2004).

Specifically, Bakhtin's understanding of participants' word usage and stories—more fully, their discourse—as both resultant and emblematic indicates a promising direction for research that seeks a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of and engagement in the world. This discourse points to markers of internal perceptions and refractions of one's social and cultural milieu.

With respect to Latino parents, for instance, a good deal of work has recognized their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), child and language socialization practices (Bhimji, 2005; Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994), and parental involvement and literacy practices (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2004; López, 2001; López & Stoelton, 2010). This work, however, has tended *not* to elaborate upon the individual social and cultural trajectories that help shape these parents' beliefs and practices. As such, this study seeks to present a diachronic picture of parental understandings and practices in order to more fully depict their cultural and contextual underpinnings (Hidalgo, 1998).

Furthermore, much of the research has emphasized alternately either the convergences or contrasts between U.S. and Latino cultures. Some studies, for instance, point to the cultural and linguistic convergences between Latinos and the dominant society (e.g., Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Vásquez et al., 1994), while others highlight the contrasts between U.S. schools and Latino homes (e.g., Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Villenas & Foley, 2002). While recognizing the indispensable contributions of these works,

my aim in this study was to attend more evenly to both convergences and contrasts, to document some of the complexity of their interplay (cf. Menard-Warwick, 2007), and to try to illuminate some of the social and cultural forces surrounding the various actors' perspectives and practices.

Along with Bakhtin, the work of Paulo Freire is an essential element of the framework that guided this research. First, Freire was the chief inspiration to Parent Coordinator Dr. Ernestina Olmedo at Jefferson School,¹ the site of this study's fieldwork. Freire's work guided her in the creation, development, and execution of parent programming that, in Ernestina's words, ministered to the "whole parent" in order to "boost parents' confidence and self-esteem, to help them create friendships, and to let them know that they have a voice" (Fieldnote excerpt, 4/7/2004).

For Freire (1993/1970, 1998), literacy called for a "humanizing" pedagogy emanating from students' intellectual curiosity, not from societal dictates. Second, a Freirean outlook on literacy, wherein literacy is seen as reading the *world* and not merely the word was essential for understanding the literacy practices of the parents in this study, many of whom had had limited access to formal schooling and print literacy, yet who formed what I came to call family literacy networks (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1987; Kalman, 1999). In some cases the parents orchestrated these networks despite personal histories of inaccessibility to print. In addition to the essential Freirean notion of reading the world, the concept of the family literacy network borrowed from three additional and related constructs:

1. Social networks: literacy as a practice residing in relational networks composed of non-print literate and literate individuals alike (Fingeret, 1983; Guerra, 1998);
2. Literacy exchanges: family literacy and service exchanges based on individual members' needs or fortes (Auerbach, 1989; Fingeret, 1983); and
3. "Generative spaces": sites that allow for and encourage literacy development (Kalman, 2004, following Zboray, 1993).

All of these constructs—networks of social relations, exchanges of services, and the social and physical contexts to make it all happen—contribute to the notion of the family literacy network.

Methodology

This article is based on a larger, three-year ethnographic study that examined literacy practices and school involvement among a group of Mexican immigrant mothers at a Silicon Valley, California elementary school. The focus here is on parental involvement practices, with attention given to parental practices with literacy as a particular form of parental involvement. The methodology design for this study was based on the already noted assumption that our cultural and historical trajectories, along with our current social milieu, influence our ways of understanding and reacting to the world around us (Bakhtin, 1981). As such, an ethnographic approach that included in-depth interviews seemed particularly appropriate to probe into these intersecting sociocultural and historical axes.

Site and Participant Selection

As a predominantly Latino school, I

chose the Jefferson site specifically because of its well-articulated parent involvement program (see Table 1 for a complete list of the programs). These programs range from instruction in native Spanish print literacy and English as a second language to literature circles (Ada, 1988) and coffees with the principal. Dr. Olmedo, affectionately known to parents as *la maestra Ernestina*, designed the Jefferson program to address a variety of parental needs and aspirations as articulated by the parents themselves.

The seven mothers chosen for this study were selected based on their regular attendance in classes. Likewise the mothers were chosen based on their willingness to grant me one or more interviews. Since Jefferson offered many classes and parent activities that I could not attend regularly, this admittedly excluded from the study, at least in focal terms, the scores of other parents active in these Jefferson programs. In fact, for the duration of this study, Dr. Olmedo counted an average of 400 parent participants yearly. This figure did not take

into account, however, parents who participated in multiple programs and were thus counted multiple times.

Aside from non-focal parents, other non-focal participants included Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano, and former principal Andy Molina, still an active participant within the Jefferson School community. Each of them granted me one or more taped interviews. In addition, I interviewed three teachers—Josefina Garza, Celia Luna, and Laura Barajas—because each had had a child from a focal family in her classroom.

Ethnographic Practices

As noted below in the study's findings, the unit of analysis employed included any act of parental participation as described or exemplified by focal parents. I utilized a variety of ethnographic techniques, including long-term presence in the field, detailed note-taking, and ample interviewing (cf. Erickson, 1986). I con-

Table 1
Parent Programs at Jefferson School and Other Local Programs

<i>Programs Directed by Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo at Jefferson Elementary School</i>		
Program Name	Brief Description	
Café con el director (Coffee with the principal)	Meeting and social networking with Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano, and parents on Tuesday mornings from 8:15-9:00.	
Club de Lectores (Readers Club)	A before-school reading club for children targeted for reading improvement, this program made heavy use of parent volunteers and met daily at 7:30-8:10 a.m. in 8-week cycles. Instituted in the 2004-05 school year.	
Lectura en Español para Adultos Inglés Oral (Basic Spanish Literacy for Adults and Oral English)	Classes met on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:00-7:00 p.m. In 2004-05, the class was shifted to 4:00-6:00 in order to add an hour of basic oral English from 6:00-7:00.	
Literature Circles	Parents read and discussed children's stories in small groups, based on a model by Alma Flor Ada (1988). Some literature circles included parents and children.	
Newspaper distribution	Distribution of 450 bilingual newspapers weekly with the help of parent volunteers.	
<i>Programs Offered at Jefferson Elementary through Other District and Community Organizations</i>		
Program Name	Program Direction	Details
English classes	Funded and administered through the local Job Training Center (JTC)	Offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:00-8:00 p.m., these English classes tended to focus on English for work purposes.
Intermediate and Advanced English	Funded through Jefferson's school district	These were added to the parent curriculum in 2004-05 and were taught Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:00-7:00 p.m.
Parent Foundation for Education (PFE)	Funded by the school district and administered by a local university	The PFE offered a series of 10-week parent education courses biennially.
Migrant Workers Program	Funded and operated through the school district, directed by a district official	Saturday mornings. One Saturday a month, parents met to discuss school and community issues in a parliamentary meeting format. The other Saturday mornings, parents attended classes, including English, while their children attended separate classes.
<i>Other Local Programs</i>		
Program Name	Program Direction	Details
Parenting Workshops	Funded and operated by the school district	These workshops were held periodically in Spanish at the school district office.
Activas en la Comunidad (Women Active in the Community)	Funded by an immigrants rights group	Activities included classes in everything from English to leadership to awareness of toxic substances, and programs in social and educational activism; held at the local youth center.

ducted myself as a participant-observer and sought to bring to light focal participants' perspectives as well as uncover and acknowledge my own subjectivities in this process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In terms of researcher activities (summarized in Table 2), I visited parent classes one-to-two times per week, attended school events, and visited homes when invited, jotting down fieldnotes during visits and later audiotaping my "headnotes" (spontaneous reflections) upon leaving the field. All notes were transcribed soon afterward. I likewise conducted several interviews with focal mothers, family members, and school officials. Twenty-one of those interviews were audiotaped and transcribed,

During interviews with focal mothers I sought to elicit narratives and uncover any linkages between the mothers' experiences in their native Mexico and parent involvement beliefs and practices in the United States. The ultimate aim in this process was to develop a thematic narrative (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) in order to tell participants' stories in their own terms, keeping as closely as possible to their own sense of themselves, their understandings of their lives, and of what it means for them for a parent to participate in her child's education. While my role as researcher required interpretation, however, I also attempted to "get out of the way" and give voice to the parents themselves.

Analytic Procedures

Early in the production of fieldnote transcriptions I engaged in open coding (Emerson et al., 1995). About midway through the study, I embarked upon more focused coding in an effort to discern patterns or regularities, as well as irregularities that might emerge from the

data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Emerson et al., 1995).

During this process I continually reviewed the data for indigenously-suggested themes, checking their validity with study participants. In this continuing analysis I focused on references to parent participation. These included activities I observed (e.g., a mother expressing concern about her child's academic progress and seeking advice during a parent class break), activities reported to me (e.g., a participant's report about conversing with a teacher or fellow parent), or a participant's views expressed about parent participation.

More about the Research Site

As noted by Pitti (2003), the myth that Silicon Valley is a great haven, not only of prosperity but also of equality and ethnic tolerance, masks a long and parallel history of economic disparity and racism toward many, including, if not especially, those of Mexican origin. This disparity continues to be reflected in the stark contrast that exists between the impoverished yet bustling Jefferson neighborhood and the glossy downtown district just five blocks away on the other side of the freeway.

The Jefferson neighborhood itself enjoys a colorful and varied geography: craftsman homes from the 1920s in various states of renovation or disrepair, two-story apartment buildings from the 1940s and 1950s, Mexican bakeries, a collection of small shops selling everything from wedding gowns to trophies, several liquor stores, *taquerías*, *supermercados*, and a few used car lots. There is also a Catholic church, Holy Family, known to the locals as *Sagrada Familia*. A variety of people can be seen coming and going throughout the neighborhood: adults with children in tow, children on bicycles, teens chatting on their way to or from school, the ice cream

man strolling by with his cart, and a man selling *chicharrones* (Mexican pig skin snacks) also from a wheeled cart.

State reports² corresponding to the duration of this study, from the years 2003 to 2006, describe Jefferson Elementary as a low-income school. Ninety-five percent of the students are Latino, with 84% being English learners, 98% of whom speak Spanish as their primary language. Jefferson is a relatively large school. The principal, Julio Serrano, reported in 2004 that Jefferson had just over 500 students in the kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5), with another 250 students at its adjoining pre-school. To serve these students, Jefferson boasts a large, well-articulated transitional bilingual education (TBE) program, honored by the California Association of Bilingual Educators (CABE). State reports likewise note Jefferson's "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) and "academic performance index" (API), which showed that Jefferson's standardized test scores were rising yearly.

Meet the Parents

As noted earlier, the focal parents in this study, all mothers, were selected based on two criteria. The first was their regular attendance in one of two focal programs—basic Spanish literacy classes and literature circles—which I likewise attended regularly. The second was the mothers' willingness to grant me one or more interviews. See Table 3 for a listing of the mothers and their children who participated in this study. Here I focus mainly on the first three mothers listed—Carolina Sandoval, Lupe Machado, and Margarita Galarza—as I got to know not only these mothers but their families as well.

Carolina Sandoval, age 42, was a petite, cheerful, smiling woman who had been in California for less than a year since her arrival from rural Michoacán, Mexico. She arrived with three of her four children, her son-in-law, and two grandchildren. Her husband Juan, age 43, was a skilled builder and bricklayer, and her elder son, Lucas, age 18, had immigrated nearly two-and-a-half years previously to work and save enough money to pay a coyote to smuggle the rest of the family across the U.S.-Mexico border at the price of \$1500 a head.

Carolina exemplified the personality of someone going through the social and cultural processes of a newly arrived parent within a new school system. Though she had never had any formal schooling, Carolina was curious about print literacy

Table 2
Summary of Researcher Activities

Dates	On-site Research Activities
May-June, 2003	Initially met with Jefferson Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo. Attended parent fundamental Spanish Literacy class. Attended parent program closing ceremony.
September, 2003-June, 2004	Visited parent classes and attended programs; acted as participant-observer and volunteer maestra (teacher), tutor, and/or facilitator once per week in each of two parent classes: (1) fundamental Spanish literacy and (2) literature circle/learning strategy parent workshops.
September, 2004-December, 2004	Facilitated a literature circle.
January, 2005-June, 2005	Acted as participant-observer, tutor and occasional maestra in the fundamental Spanish literacy class and basic English class.
January, 2005-June, 2006	Conducted interviews with focal parents, family members, and parent leaders, as well as school staff. Conducted home visits.

and found printed material especially ubiquitous in her new surroundings in the U.S. In the basic Spanish literacy class we attended, Carolina was a quick learner, eager to take advantage of the opportunity to attend formal classes for the first time. Juan, different from the Latino husbands documented in Rockhill (1993), wholeheartedly supported Carolina's efforts. "Why should she stay home?" he said, "She'll just get bored."

Like Carolina Sandoval, Lupe Machado, age 43, was a diminutive woman. She hailed from a Michoacán village and had four children. Also like Carolina, Lupe was a kind and cheerful woman with a small frame, dark eyes, and a gleeful smile. But unlike Carolina, who had only two children attending school during the study, Lupe's four school-aged children ranged from Sophie, age 5, a Jefferson kindergartner, to Elda, age 17, a high school junior at a public charter school, Silicon Valley College (SVC) Prep. Between Sophie and Elda were Benjamín, age 12 and in the sixth grade at Harding Middle School, and Paloma, age 16, a sophomore also at SVC Prep.

Lupe also differed from Carolina in that she had lived in the U.S. for more than 13 years. Even though her schooling had been interrupted by childrearing duties as the oldest of 10 children, when both of her parents left for the U.S. to work as

migrants, Lupe had managed to receive her 6th grade diploma in Mexico. Now doing janitorial work, Lupe had previously worked for several years picking produce in the fields just south of the Silicon Valley. She was part of the third generation of undocumented California farmworkers in her family. Lupe was married to Diego Machado, age 41, a construction worker. Diego was the father of the two younger children, and a stepfather to Elda and Paloma.

With four children at three schools, Lupe was a busy woman, attending parent meetings at all three schools. Further, she took advantage of time off work, precipitated by a back injury on the job, to take classes at Jefferson, join a women's community booster group called *Activas en la Comunidad* (Women Active in the Community), and volunteer more often at schools. But Lupe received no monetary disability benefits during her time off from work and the family suffered a great deal financially. Adding to the hardship, on Valentine's Day, 2006, Lupe's family was suddenly served notice by the city government to vacate their unpermitted apartment within 24 hours. The sudden eviction forced the family to split up into twos and live with different members of their extended family. After six weeks the family found a new apartment and was back together again.

Margarita Galarza was a sweet, giggly, wide-eyed woman aged 55. Although she had no child at Jefferson, Margarita was the mother of four with her youngest about to graduate from high school. Margarita and I met in June of 2003 in a basic Spanish literacy class. Margarita had dedicated herself to a dogged pursuit of print literacy. She had been in the U.S. the longest time of any of the focal mothers. Margarita's educational background was similar to that of Carolina, who likewise had no formal schooling.

Unlike Carolina, however, Margarita carried the baggage of having lived and worked in the print-saturated U.S. for 20 years. Margarita reported humiliation where she worked at a Mexican restaurant for not knowing how to read and write. Without such knowledge, she said, she would always be relegated to kitchen help. Margarita worked seven days a week, cleaning houses and a doctor's office on her "days off." Despite her strenuous work schedule, however, Margarita was determined to learn to read and write. This determination, I would come to find, was reflected in the formal educational endeavors of Margarita's young adult daughters as they made their way through high school and college.

Table 3
Summary of Focal Mothers (data from academic year 2004-2005)

Name	Age	Years in U.S.	Work Outside Home	Marital Status	Classes and Parent Programs Attended	Children	Place of Origin
Carolina Sandoval	42	< 1	No	M	Basic Spanish literacy and Beginning English, Migrants Program	Soledad (23), Lucas (18) Maribel (13), Juan (9)	rural Michoacán
Lupe Machado	43	13	Yes	M	Activas en la Comunidad, Basic Spanish literacy and Beginning English, Coffees with the Principal, Club de Lectores, District Parent Workshops, Youth Center Workshops	Elda (17), Paloma (16), Benjamín (12), Sophie (5)	rural Michoacán
Margarita Galarza	57	20	Yes	M	Basic Spanish literacy and Beginning English, Legal Residency Workshops	Eloisa (30), Daughter (26), Diana (22), Son (18)	rural Zacatecas
Rosa Anaya	30	10	No	M	Coffees with the Principal, Club de Lectores, District Parent Workshops, Intermediate English, Literature Circles, Migrants Program	Kathy (8), Ernesto (4)	rural Jalisco
Helena Contreras	36	13	No	M	Coffees with the Principal, Club de Lectores, District Parent Workshops, Intermediate and Advanced English, Literature Circles, Migrants Program, Parent Foundation for Education	Beti (9), Alicia (7), Alejandra (4)	Mexico City
Mercedes Otero	36	15	No	M	Basic Spanish literacy and Beginning English, Migrants Program	Carrie (9), Alex (4)	rural Guanajuato
Alma Rivera	48	12	Yes	D	Activas en la Comunidad, Coffees with the Principal, Club de Lectores, District Parent Workshops, Literature Circles, Migrants Program	3 in U.S.: Cecilia (24), Carlos (19), Jorge (11), 5 grown children in Mexico	urban Guanajuato

Discussion

This discussion pays particular attention to the linkages between the mothers' childhood experiences with schooling and literacy in their native Mexico and their patterns of parent involvement with literacy and schooling in the U.S.

Historical Trajectories vis-à-vis Schooling and Print Literacy

Table 4 summarizes the mothers' levels of formal education. All of these mothers came from large families with few financial resources in which tough decisions had to be made about which children could go to school and for how long, as well as how the required fees and supplies could be paid. Factors that influenced such decisions surrounding schooling included availability of funds and transportation, as well as children's birth order and gender, in that particular order.

Helena Contreras, for instance, had wanted to attend a normal school to become a teacher, but her mother said it was too far so she would have to attend the nearby public vocational school to become a medical assistant. For Carolina Sandoval, however, lack of transportation meant that she was denied access to school altogether.

The families' efforts to earn the cash to pay school fees (called *cuotas*), as well as for mandatory school supplies, were a process that for three of the mothers had produced tears in childhood and that, in the cases of Margarita Galarza and Alma Rivera, emerged again as they recounted their past to me in new tears. In the U.S., for example, when we talk about someone "working her way through school," we interpret "school" as "college." But in the case of Alma Rivera, after her father died, she had to work to pay her way from third through sixth grade, ultimately earning her sixth-grade diploma. Alma spoke of knocking on the doors of people's homes

until someone would hire her to perform household chores part-time, so that she could earn enough money to pay for school and still have time to go there. Certainly formal education, then, was a value deeply rooted within these mothers from their childhoods in Mexico.

Print Literacy Practices: The Family Literacy Network

In terms of literacy practices, the families I observed could be characterized as social networks revolving around literacy connections (Farr, 1994; Fingeret, 1983; Guerra, 1998; Vásquez et al., 1994) involving crisscrossing literacy exchanges in Spanish and English in both conversational and print-related formats (Fingeret, 1983).

Margarita's daughters, for instance, had taught Margarita such literacy tasks as using the telephone and the local bus system, the latter of which was essential if Margarita was to learn a new bus route to enable her to attend basic Spanish literacy and English classes. Margarita, for her part, provided childcare for one daughter who had a baby and helped all of her daughters pay for books and college tuition. Thus, family members exchanged services, many of which related to literacy, and Margarita participated fully even though she herself was not print literate.

In the Sandoval family, Carolina provided her granddaughter with childcare and accompanied her to school, while her daughters Soledad and Maribel generally aided their mother with household tasks, including those related to print. In all participant families, in fact, different family members assumed different roles and responsibilities, presumably according to their abilities, but usually under the direction of an undisputed authority—Mom!

This was especially evident in the Sandoval household where Carolina saw to it that her daughters performed a variety

of literacy tasks—reading bills and correspondences, taking down addresses, or aiding in deciphering neighborhood signs and landmarks—upon Carolina's immediate request. Although Carolina herself was not print literate, she was the chief authority and orchestrator of her family literacy network.

Other shared literacies reported by focal mothers included story reading and storytelling by parents, siblings, and children; parents helping children with homework in Spanish and children helping parents with homework in English (cf. Auerbach, 1989); non-print literate parents insisting that their children read books aloud to them that had been lent or given by Jefferson school; and print literate parents and children sharing information about good books they'd read at school.

In short, whether the parents themselves were print-literate or not, they engaged in a variety of practices supportive of—if not downright demanding of—print literacy development on the part of their children, all of which took place within a family framework that I came to call the *family literacy network*. As in the work of Fingeret (1983), the non-print literate participated fully in these networks and understood much about print literacy even though they couldn't necessarily perform certain print-related tasks.

As Freire and Macedo (1987) explain, these non-print literate parents could read many social and cultural worlds that surrounded print. Situated within the home was a generative space for literacy development (Kalman 2004, following Zboray, 1993). Thus, the family literacy network was a site of frequent and diverse practices.

Literacy Exchanges in the Classroom and Back Home Again

In parent classes, as in the family setting, network-type exchanges were similarly frequent, whether they took place between adult students working in pairs, adults paired with volunteer tutors (usually Spanish learners from a local college), or adults and their children. Children often attended class with parents or grandparents if the children were either too young for childcare or old enough to participate in class. Among adults working in pairs during writing tasks, both adults would contribute orally to the content of the writing, even if only one of them possessed the skill to put pencil to paper and form the words.

Similarly, children, especially during

Table 4
The Mothers' Schooling in Mexico

Name	Formal Schooling Completed
Carolina Sandoval	none
Lupe Machado	4th grade, then 6th grade equivalency certificate though adult school in Mexico at age 16
Margarita Galarza	1st grade
Rosa Anaya	6th grade
Helena Contreras	9th grade, then completion of vocational high school (training in medical assistance)
Mercedes Otero	6th grade
Alma Rivera	6th grade (with final months of 6th grade completed in adult school), vocational courses in baking and cake decorating

readings tasks, might act as tutors for parents by helping parents who were novice readers to sound out and pronounce written words, whether in Spanish or English. Parents, in turn, regardless of literacy level, were model students, exhibiting for their children, and for each other determination, cooperation, persistence, and hard work.

In this way, like the family literacy network, Jefferson School's parent classes under *la maestra Ernestina's* direction provided a generative space and a safe haven for the execution of print literacy practices, even for those parents with limited direct use of print (Kalman, 2004, following Zboray, 1993). It is interesting to note that although parents' backgrounds in formal schooling and access to print diverged widely—ranging from no formal education, to completion of the sixth grade, to completion of vocational high school—all of the parents engaged in and supported a variety of multidirectional exchanges surrounding the development of print literacy, both in the home and in the classroom. This was in contrast to mere unidirectional exchanges from parent to child, or from expert to novice. Jefferson's parent programs reinforced home literacy practices and in turn home practices fomented school-based literacies.

Parental Involvement: Patterns of Participation

Engagement in literate activities was one element in a typology of activities that focal mothers defined as parent involvement. These emerged in seven broad categories listed in Table 5. In response to the question, "*¿Qué puede hacer una mamá o un papá para ayudar a su hijo en la escuela?*" (What can a mom or dad do to help his or her child in school?), all of the items in Table 5 were specifically verbalized by two to four mothers as things that they had done to help their children succeed in school. These included being present at school, communication with the school, involvement in school activities, literacy support at home, material support, moral support, and parental determination. Moreover, all of the mothers either reported engaging in all of the above categories of involvement, or teachers or administrators reported the mothers' engagement, and/or it was something I observed myself firsthand.

In some ways, it may seem that this list holds much in common with the prescriptive lists critiqued previously in the literature review. However the mothers described in this article enacted more wide-ranging practices than generally acknowl-

edged in much of the literature. While the prescriptive literature has tended to hone in on school participation in specific parent-teacher organizations (PTOs), such as a PTA or school site council (cf. Comer, Haynes & Joyner, 1996), focal mothers saw mere presence on campus as an opportunity to interact with other members of the school community—children, school officials, and other parents—and thus as an opportunity to learn about the progress of their children and happenings at school and in the community.

Similarly, the prescriptive literature, even when espousing "two-way communication," has typically focused on unidirectional communication from school to parent (cf. Swap, 1993), or to prescribe teacher-initiated communication (Epstein et al., 2002). In this case, however, the mothers often initiated communication with school officials and with each other, essentially networking in order to grasp the lay of the land, to read the world of the U.S. educational system, and specifically that of Jefferson School.

Material support, as another example, according to the mothers' definition, did not appear to address the prescriptive literature's typical call for a quiet place at home to study. Rather, it included activities that some middle class parents might take for granted, such as efforts to provide nutritious food, shelter, and transportation to school.

In another example, participant families demonstrated a good deal of support for print literacy in the home, and yet the homes I visited did not have many books. Books, like toys or pets, were luxuries these families tended not to have (Valdés, 1996), except for when they bor-

rowed books at school or from the library, won them in school and class contests, or received them as gifts from Ernestina or from myself. Yet once they'd resettled in their new apartment, the Machado family library grew from one shelf to four. In the Sandoval household, every piece of print that entered the home received much attention. In one case Carolina insisted that her youngest, Juanito, then a rising fourth grader, read her human subjects permission letter out loud to her in English, even though she'd already heard it in Spanish. Other material goods, in addition to pens, paper, and crayons, came in the form of second-hand goods, such as a desktop computer that Juan Sandoval was able to purchase for his family. Similarly, Diego Machado purchased a used compact car so that his daughters could more easily get to school at SVC Prep.

It should be noted that some of the findings in the parent participation categories overlap. To the mothers, for instance, moral support for their children (item 6) also implied lending support to school and community (item 3), as well as setting a good example and instilling values as a role model (item 7). So when *la maestra Ernestina* asked parents to support Jefferson teachers and attend a downtown protest against the Governor's cutbacks, several mothers showed up, children in tow.

Note that such political activism on behalf of schools is not generally viewed in the prescriptive or quantitative literature as a form of parent involvement, and yet Latinos have historically played a decisive role in the politics surrounding educational equity (Moreno & Valencia, 2002). In a similar case of overlapping forms of participation typically unacknowledged in

Table 5
The Mothers' Typology of Parent Involvement Practices

1. **Presence at school:** on the school grounds, including attendance at school functions (i.e., assemblies, coffees, meetings, open houses, parent classes, and parent-teacher conferences), and general presence on campus before, during, or after school;
2. **Communication with and within the school:** networking with other parents and with teachers and/or administrators; advocating for one's children at school;
3. **Involvement in school and community activities:** participation such as volunteering, engaging in political activities, and community organizing;
4. **Literacy support at home:** employing or otherwise promoting literacy and numeracy at home;
5. **Material support:** providing food, shelter, clothing, hygiene, transportation, school supplies, and enrollment in enrichment programs; providing enrichment activities outside of school;
6. **Moral support:** encouraging children or keeping after them as needed; recognizing that different children need different kinds of support; reminding children to take advantage of the educational opportunities before them;
7. **Parental determination:** seeking to give their children a better future; acting as perseverant, positive role models for their children.

much of the literature, Juan Sandoval felt it was important to set a good example for Juanito: not only did he take Juanito to a political protest for immigration rights, but on school holidays Juan insisted that Juanito accompany him to work. Juanito loved summer school and spoke fondly of trips taken to NASA and a nearby mission, San Juan Bautista, but even without such perks, summer school, he said, was far more preferable to bricklaying with his father.

Thus, Juan Sandoval, in a manner similar to the migrant parents documented by López (2001), engaged his young son in physical labor on days off from school as a form of parental participation, teaching his son a valuable work ethic and reminding him that going to school was demonstrably preferable to toiling in the sun.

Conclusion: Parent Involvement in the Eyes of the Beholder

Convergences and contrasts in parent participation may actually be present as opposite sides of the same coin. For example, this study found parents highly active in their children's education in a variety of ways yet, as reported elsewhere (Miano, 2010), the perceptions of school officials appeared to depend more on their own aims and visions than on actual parent practices. Some school staff approached the school as a community to be constantly strengthened, while others focused on improving classroom performance and standardized test scores.

Thus, school officials' relative vantage points of observation—the school as community versus the classroom as learning laboratory—affected their view of parents regardless of actual parental activity. Furthermore, unlike administrators who had direct contact with parents regularly and even made home visits, teachers had much less contact with parents and had not visited homes and therefore did not necessarily assess actual parent involvement practices.

Focal parents, reflective of hundreds of other Jefferson parents not included in this study, overwhelmingly sought to advance their children's education. Regardless of their own (in)access to formal education, focal mothers engaged in and orchestrated family literacy networks, and participated in their children's schooling in six other broad categories as well: presence at school, communication with and within the school, school and community activi-

ties, material support, moral support, and role modeling.

Yet the parents' activities, and indeed the parents themselves, remained largely invisible to teachers. Although Jefferson's parental programs invited teachers to volunteer and participate alongside parents, few teachers, under heightened pressure to improve children's test scores, found the time to do so. As such, if Jefferson's parental programs exhibited a flaw, it was that they had not yet found a way to connect teachers to parents.

The differences between perceptions and reality that ultimately emerge are not only between parents and teachers, but rather are more broadly between parents and society. This brief article only scratches the surface of the intersecting layers of social, cultural, and historical complexity involving race, class, language, and societal misperceptions about the non-print literate and the less formally educated.

It should be clear, however, that the parents in this study, all Mexican immigrants from a variety of educational and work backgrounds, were *highly active* and *supportive* of their children's education, as well as their own lifelong learning. Their involvement practices can help us consider ways to expand our vision of involvement and provide spaces and resources to further encourage it. We as educators and researchers can learn much if we look and listen to parents whose trajectories may be different from our own.

We can only hope that, by spreading the word, *tocando puertas*, or knocking on doors, as Alma Rivera would say, we increasingly provide immigrant parents with generative spaces for literacy development and reading new worlds, and likewise provide a forum to share their life circumstances and historical trajectories. Understanding such trajectories can help researchers and educators read parents' worlds, instead of unproblematically expecting parents to read ours.

Notes

¹ All participant, school, and organization names are pseudonyms.

² Accessed at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ar>

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