

# ***Contra la Corriente* (Against the Current): The Role of Latino Fathers in Family–School Engagement**

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## **Abstract**

A community-based, multisite study using mixed methods examined the experiences and perspectives of Latino students and families in a low performing urban school district in New York State. This research project was spearheaded by a Latino Education Task Force which brought together multiple stakeholders in a collaborative effort to counteract high dropout rates and deficit thinking about Latino youth and their families. The findings reported here, drawn from a thematic analysis of data collected specifically from focus groups with parents, center on Latino fathers' perspectives and experiences. We utilized a conceptual framework of Latino family epistemology and alternative parental role theory to explore the role of Puerto Rican fathers in family–school engagement. Findings reveal that these fathers: (a) cultivate education as a family and community affair in order to promote school success; (b) critique dynamics within the parent–school–district system and advocate for their children; and (c) acknowledge their vulnerable positioning as fathers resisting racism and invisibility in schools and the larger community. Fathers understood middle-class forms of involvement as well as culture and power dynamics, suggesting their involvement was a form of agency—a pushing back against the system that made them distrustful in the first place. A common theme across the data sources is the idea of moving *contra la corriente* or going against the current. Our research highlights the need for collaboration and community action aimed at “adjusting the sails” as we move toward educational equity.

Key Words: parent roles in education, Latino fathers, Latina/o family engagement, community-based research, Puerto Rican, dads, advocates, schools

## Introduction

There is a growing body of scholarship revealing misunderstandings and misperceptions about the role of Latino<sup>1</sup> parents in education and the concept of parental involvement as defined by dominant, mainstream schools (Auerbach, 2007; Behnke & Kelly, 2011; Hill & Torres, 2010; López, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernández, 2003; Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). This literature reminds us of the need to both counteract deficit perceptions of Latino families and reconceptualize parent roles in education as a means to enhance students' schooling experiences and to provide greater access to educational opportunities including higher education.

Family engagement plays an important role in shaping Latino students' educational experiences (Hill & Torres, 2010; Rodríguez-Brown, 2010). We use the term *family engagement* as a way of reconceptualizing family roles to better capture the influential individuals who are involved in children's education. As noted by Hill and Torres (2010), family engagement also represents the aspirations of Latino families, including social and academic achievement goals—and the sacrifices and investments made to promote such goals—as part of a desire for “upward mobility, a better life, and the deep value for education” (p. 95).

Along these lines, it is important to understand that Latino parents' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities regarding their children's academic development are grounded in sociocultural values about *educación*, which encompasses being moral, responsible, respectful, and well behaved (Auerbach 2006, 2007, 2011; Carger, 1996, Olmedo, 2003). Additionally, Latino parents “believe that they are responsible for developing these aspects of their children, which are the foundation of the academic education that is the school's domain” (Hill & Torres, p. 100).

For many U.S. Latino families, home-based social and moral child rearing practices are foundational to school-based, academic practices (Auerbach, 2007; Quiñones, 2012; Villenas, 2002; Zarate, 2007; Zentella, 2005) and, therefore, integral to Latinos' view of family engagement in education. Both family and school practices are necessary components for *una buena educación*, or “a good education.” From this perspective, parental involvement is reframed as a multidimensional concept inclusive of family–school engagement practices and educational expectations and aspirations, anchored in Latino-centered views of education (Auerbach, 2007, 2011; Delgado Gaitan, 2004; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Lopez, 2007; Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006).

### Latino Fathers: An Untapped Resource in Family–School Engagement?

The support from Latino fathers has been positioned as an “untapped resource” with the ability to positively influence the academic experiences of Latino youth (Behnke, González, & Cox, 2010, p. 4). In a study of ecological factors influencing North Carolina Latino youths’ academic success, Behnke, González, and Cox (2010) found that “fathers played a strong role in the academic success of the Latino youth (both boys and girls)” (p. 4). However, there is a need to further examine how Latino fathers are positioned in their children’s education, since much of the existing literature focuses largely on the role of Latina mothers (see, among others, Auerbach, 2002, 2007; De la Vega, 2007; Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Hidalgo, 2000; Olmedo, 2003; Rolón, 2000; Rolón-Dow, 2010; Villenas, 2001; Yosso, 2006). For example, Hidalgo (2000) explores Puerto Rican mothers’ socialization strategies related to children’s academic success. Likewise, Rolón’s (2000) analysis of Puerto Rican young women’s educational experiences reveals significant and positive roles that mothers played throughout their children’s educational lives.

In an exploratory quantitative study examining the role of 77 Mexican-origin fathers in their children’s education, Lopez (2007) found that “Spanish-speaking fathers reported more negative perceptions of their child’s school, less positive contacts with their child’s teachers, and were less involved in their child’s school than either English/Spanish-speaking or English-speaking fathers” (p. 61). Her findings corroborate with previous research demonstrating that cultural and linguistic barriers relate to Latino parents (mothers and fathers) feeling unwelcome in their child’s school community (Auerbach, 2007; Chavkin & González, 1995; Hill & Torres, 2010; Hyslop, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

More importantly, Lopez (2007) found that all of the fathers in her study, regardless of socioeconomic status and linguistic acculturation status, believed “that parents, not just mothers or schools, should be responsible for children’s education” (p. 72). The latter finding is important for two main reasons. First, it is in contrast to findings from several previous studies (i.e., Chavkin & González, 1995; Trumbull et al., 2001; Galanti, 2003) suggesting “that Latino parents see a sharp divide between parental and school roles” (Lopez, 2007, p. 72) and that “Latino fathers define their roles in terms of patriarchal authority” (Lopez, 2007, p. 72). Second, this research points to an undertheorized area, namely, changing gender roles and blurring boundaries in U.S. Latino family–school engagement.

Additional literature about the role of fathers in children's education have been limited to studying Mexican American families in Texas, Arizona, and California (Auerbach, 2007; Delgado Gaitan, 1994a, 1994b; López, 2001; Lopez, 2007; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldberg, 1995; Valdés, 1996). This body of scholarship is helpful for understanding how working-class fathers support children's education by giving *consejos* (advice), emphasizing the value of work, and engaging in child rearing practices that foster social and moral development informed by Latino cultural values.

Elenes and Delgado Bernal (2010) suggest that research in Latino education needs to examine the experiences of Latino subgroups. These constellations of experience can differ in the ways that migration, language, politics, and history distinguish subgroups from each other. To our knowledge, existing research about the role of Latino fathers in their children's education does not account for the experiences of Puerto Rican fathers. Given that "Puerto Ricans have achieved the dubious distinction of being one of the most undereducated ethnic groups in the United States" (Nieto, 2004, p. 388), we purposefully focus on Puerto Rican father-school engagement as part of individual and collective efforts to "RicanStruct the discourse" (Irizarry & Antrop-González, 2007, p. 37) in education research. Hence, our work complements the existing research about Latino fathers by accounting for the perspectives and experiences of Puerto Rican families in Northwestern New York.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

A greater understanding of Latino fathers' experiences and perspectives is particularly important in light of racial and gender disparities and the disenfranchisement of Latino males in U.S. education and society (Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011). Nationwide, Latino males are more likely to be characterized as "troubled" and more likely to drop out of high school and college than their female counterparts (Noguera et al., 2011; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Moreover, Latino children in U.S. schools are more likely than their White peers to live in single female-headed, low income households (Mather, 2010). Indeed, the existing trend of the "vanishing" Latino male in higher education (see Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009) has implications for family and social dynamics, workforce relations, economic development, and the overall educational status of Latinos in the United States.

Rather than portraying Latino fathers as troublemakers, problematic, or otherwise vanishing and absent, our research shifted the gaze onto a purposeful sample of socially and academically engaged Puerto Rican fathers who participated in a larger mixed methods study about the experiences and perspectives

of Latino students and families in a low performing urban school district (PreK–12) in New York State. For the purposes of this paper, we specifically examined the data derived from the focus groups in which fathers participated. Although we do not make the assumption that the mere presence of fathers is necessarily associated with more positive or improved educational outcomes, we know that we can benefit from a deeper understanding of their engagement and “attitudes toward their children’s education, including their hopes for their children’s futures, the misunderstanding of their participation, and suggestions for improving their involvement” (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006, p. 256).

The purpose of this paper is to examine Puerto Rican fathers’ perspectives and experiences about their role in promoting school success and supporting their children’s education. Drawing from Quiocho and Daoud (2006), the following research questions guide this paper:

- a) How do the Puerto Rican fathers in this study support their children’s education?
- b) What do they perceive as obstacles to family–school engagement?
- c) What recommendations do they have for improving the educational status of U.S. Latino students and their families?

Considered together, these questions allow us to gain a better understanding of the role of Puerto Rican fathers in their children’s education in the context of family–school engagement.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Hidalgo’s (1999, 2005) U.S. Latino families’ epistemology framework informs our research and works from the premise that “Latino/a knowledge creation is, in part, a process of accommodation, resistance, and change in response to the cultural and structural forces that shape the lived experiences of individuals and the collective groups” (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 378). This framework offers three tenets of Latino families’ epistemology. First is the collective experience of oppression within the U.S. racial classification system. That is, “Latino/as have a unique interpretation of race that stems from the historic racial intermixture that comprises the Latino/a population” (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 379). Puerto Rican families, for instance, represent race as a continuum and fluid phenomena shaped by socioeconomics, sociopolitical history, and colonial dynamics with the U.S. power structure (Hidalgo, 2005). An important take away from this first tenet is the idea that “Latino/a families are not mere victims of racism but resist and adapt to their collective experience of oppression” (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 379).

A second tenet is the primacy of the family and cultural and ethnic values which “stem from common history, language, rituals, beliefs, and experiences that group members share” (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 381). For instance, their culture values the primacy of family functions to maintain family unity, close family ties, and interdependence with immediate and extended kin. What is important to understand from this second tenet is the idea that “ethnic values provide a safety net against conflicting values of the dominant society” (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 381). In other words, the maintenance of cultural values is an integral part of the process of resistance, accommodation, and change.

Keeping intergroup diversity and fluidity of constructs in mind, the third tenet in Hidalgo’s research framework accounts for “shared values in service of resistance” (Hidalgo, 2005, pp. 378–379). That is, Latino families “reaffirm their culture and lay claim to their unique knowledge base” as they engage in daily, everyday life in the U.S. context (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 379). For instance, the development of *confianza* (mutual trust) between residents in a U.S. neighborhood reinforces values of social reciprocity and interdependence. This adaptive strategy is a source of strength for Latino families and validates cultural ways of knowing in the midst of particular contexts.

We complement Hidalgo’s U.S. Latino family framework with Auerbach’s (2007, 2009) typology of parent roles to better understand how the fathers in our study served as resources in the educational lives of their children. Auerbach’s research with Latino families explores schooling and equity issues, particularly how “marginalized parents construct their role in promoting their children’s access to educational opportunity” (2007, p. 250). She identifies three parent role orientations along a broad continuum of *apoyo* (providing support) for their children’s education. Auerbach’s typology is helpful because it accounts for “constraints and struggles faced by working-class, marginalized parents” and highlights their “stance as protectors and advocates” (2007, p. 258).

Of particular interest is Auerbach’s category of *struggling advocates*. Auerbach describes struggling advocates as “parents who provided more direct, instrumental support and monitoring at home along with advocacy at school” (2007, p. 258). Struggling advocate parents tend to be proactive (hands-on) and persistent as they seek information and negotiate for access with the goal of enhancing opportunities toward social mobility and quality of life aspirations. They acknowledge the importance of Latino-oriented cultural notions of “home-based training in morals and respect” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 263) and mitigate home and school experiences with the belief that they can make a difference as parents. Although their frame of reference may reflect dominant middle-class college-going practices, they struggle with “considerable frustration in dealing with schools” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 266).

Table 1. Excerpt of Auerbach’s (2007) Alternative Typology of Parent Roles

	Moral Supporters	Struggling Advocates	Ambivalent Companions
Metaphor	<i>Hands-off</i> ; clearing the path, pointing the way from afar	<i>Hands-on</i> ; pushing for progress, encountering rebuff	<i>Hands-up</i> ; accompanying the journey, holding on to relationships
Mode of Support	Approving, motivating, encouraging, indirect guidance ( <i>consejos</i> )	Monitoring, advocating, seeking information, negotiating for access	Encouraging, communicating, protecting, occasional assisting on request
Locus of Support	Home	Home and school	Mostly home
Root of Support	Perception of child’s ability and motivation, trust in child, immigrant quest for mobility	Family mobility aspirations, distrust of system, belief that parents make a difference	Close relationship with child, wish to help her meet her goals and avoid the parent’s struggles
Goal of Support	Launch child for success, build resilience	Access opportunity, improve life chances	Bolster child’s self-esteem, maintain relationship, keep safe

In sum, we draw from Hidalgo’s (2005) Latino family epistemology framework and Auerbach’s (2007, 2009) research with working-class Latino families to explore Puerto Rican fathers’ understanding of their roles in providing support for their children’s education. This combined interpretive framework allows us to examine these fathers’ experiences and perspectives in context and analyze their stances and participation in family–school engagement processes.

### Research Methods

The data in this paper are drawn from a community-based study using mixed methods to examine the experiences and perspectives of Latino students and families in a low performing urban school district (PreK–12) in New York State. The larger research study represents part of the agenda of a Latino Education Task Force, which brings together families, students, community leaders, school officials, university faculty, and graduate students in a collaborative effort to counteract high dropout rates and deficit thinking about Latino youth and their families. Within the study school district, Latinos have the lowest graduation rate at 38%, a rate that recently just fell another 6%. Equally

troubling is the high dropout rate of Latinos in the district, which most recently was reported at 33% (New York State Department of Education, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Latinos within the city make up about 16% of the total population and about 20% of the student population in the city school district.

### **Data Collection**

As part of the larger study, 31 focus groups among parents/guardians and students were conducted at nine community locations over the course of seven months. Forty-four parents/guardians and 95 students (ages 11–18) participated in the focus groups with the intent of identifying resources that promote student persistence and success as well as the barriers that limit educational experiences. Recruitment of participants was a multistep process that included community nominations of students and family members from school counselors, local community leaders, teachers, and community advocates. Information letters were sent to every nominated student or parent. Additionally, the local school district provided the research team with a contact list of parents of students who had dropped out of school. These individuals and their families were also sent information letters and invited to participate. Finally, recruitment occurred through already established programs within schools and through community events like college fairs and school district parent forums.

For the purposes of this paper, we draw from the 11 focus groups with parents and guardians, of which 81% (36) were female, and 18% (8) were male. Fathers were present in five of the focus groups; all eight fathers self-identified as Puerto Rican. While the majority of parent/guardian participants were female, the stories and perspectives shared by fathers were significant as they represented an understudied population. We have chosen to privilege the fathers' responses as there is a lack of literature focusing specifically on father engagement, particularly as it relates to Puerto Rican families.

Focus groups were fitting for this study as it allowed for family members to come together to make meaning of their children's school experiences in a collective space (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Similarly, the collectivist orientation Latino families often come from allowed for a community dialogue to ensue based on shared educational and cultural experiences (Mertens, 1998; Rodríguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011). Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and was facilitated by two members of our research team.

Focus groups were conducted in Spanish and English with family members often switching back and forth between both languages. Focus groups were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus group protocol included questions about parent/guardian perspectives of students' school experiences and transition between grades and schools. We were interested in understanding

why certain students were progressing and others were dropping out. We also asked about the ways in which family members were involved in their children's education—at home, in school, and in community settings. Finally, we asked about concerns or recommendations that family members had about the current status of Latino education in the local school district.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis began with an initial read of two transcripts by a collaborative research team. This helped to ensure intercoder agreement and consistency in preliminary findings and provided an important element of trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). A list of preexisting codes was developed from this initial read and was further organized by drawing from relevant literature. Initial analysis began with two primary categories: factors influencing Latino dropout, and factors influencing Latino success. Categories were then organized into subcategories around personal/youth factors, environmental factors, and school factors. NVivo 8 was utilized to further analyze the data into refined themes and categories (Bazeley, 2008). Within each of these subcategories we included a code for parents or family engagement and obstacles to engagement.

Since Hidalgo's (2005) Latino families' epistemology framework "requires the interrogation of the researchers' conceptual lens throughout the research" (p. 376), we included researcher journals and analytical memos in our research process as a way of exploring our own subjectivities, biases, and positionalities. The researcher journals and analytical memos also served as data sources in the development of interpretations and findings.

To develop the line of inquiry about the role of fathers, we did an additional level of analysis of the focus group data. That is, we revisited the focus group transcripts in light of the research questions about Latino fathers' understanding of their roles in supporting their children's education, areas of concern, and recommendations for improving the educational status of U.S. Latino students and their families. With these focus areas in mind, we coded and marked transcripts for individual passages and then grouped codes into categories. We then created three composite narrative profiles based on the eight father participants to further analyze, interpret, and share the focus group material (Seidman, 2006). While these composite profiles highlight three fathers, the identities and themes found within are representative of all eight father participants (see Gildersleeve, 2010 and Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001 for more on use of composite characters). We approached each participant profile as a "case" and have assigned pseudonyms to the names of the fathers and to the city. Although diverse in how the fathers came to participate in the study, there were common themes within and across all of the focus groups in which fathers participated.

### **Researcher Positionalities**

We represent two members of a larger multiracial/ethnic and multilingual research team. Some members originate from the local urban area, while other members have moved into the city for personal, academic, and professional reasons. Thus, we are both insiders and outsiders to the local Latino community. The two authors of this particular paper both identify as Latina, one of whom is originally from Puerto Rico and the other who identifies as Mexican-American. While we were able to communicate in both English and Spanish with parents, we recognize that as two Latina women, our identities as women may have provided an additional barrier when recruiting and connecting with fathers. Yet, we found that our other identities helped to create important connections with the fathers in this study. For example, the first author is a former school teacher in the local school district and has served on a number of community boards and activities. Her presence in the local community was an important element in establishing trust with the families. We recognize the challenges associated with ignoring one's identity and potential biases. Because of this, we regularly shared reflective memos, discussed our positionalities in research team meetings, and followed Milner's (2007) advice to work through the dangers of our and others' racialized and cultural ways of knowing.

### **Trustworthiness**

Credibility in qualitative studies "refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Due to the interpretive nature of this inquiry, it is unlikely that another research study can "confirm" the credibility of the findings. However, we put procedures in place to confirm inferences and interpretations as we attempted to make sense of the data sources. Including researcher reflexivity as part of the data sources facilitated the process of establishing trustworthiness and validity as a collaborative team of researchers. As noted above, this was accomplished by each member of the research team writing researcher memos and journals. In addition to engaging in researcher reflexivity, important validation and trustworthiness strategies were employed during this study. We took special care to establish a sense of trust and rapport with family participants and spent time before and after the focus groups to learn more about the families. For example, parents were often involved in a community or school-based program. Thus, time was often spent learning more about the roles they played in these programs before the official focus group began. We also drew on characteristics of peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007). Peer debriefing was accomplished by presenting preliminary findings to the larger research team and colleagues within

our school of education. Peer debriefing allowed us to reduce bias in the analysis and representation of the data. Both authors were members of the Latino Education Task Force, commissioned by the community-based organization who initiated the larger research project. Preliminary findings about the role of fathers were presented to the Education Task Force in an effort to obtain feedback. Presentations also occurred to various community stakeholders including personnel from the local school district.

## Participant Profiles

Before we begin our discussion of the findings, we provide brief composite narrative profiles of the fathers that we highlight in our findings.

### *Joel Cabrera*

Born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, one of the first things that Joel noted was that he and his wife Rosa originally came to Lakeview, New York on “January 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1989 for vacation and ended up staying.” This migration from Puerto Rico to Lakeview was significant in their lives, and 20 years later, Rosa and Joel still remembered the date. Over this 20-year period, the family had also lived in Chicago and Michigan, but had chosen to return and resettle in Lakeview. They live in Lakeview with their three children (two boys, one girl).

At the time of the focus group interview, Joel had been a supervisor and production manager at a private factory for nearly four years. He seemed pleased with his job, and this was one of the reasons he resettled his family to Lakeview. Although quiet at first, midway through the discussion, he began to talk about his experiences and perspectives. In fact, Joel admitted to us (the researchers) that although he had “a lot to say,” he felt reluctant to participate because he wasn’t sure he could trust us or the process. He gave credit to his wife Rosa who had encouraged him to participate in the focus group that was held at the local Spanish-speaking Catholic church that they attended as a family.

A salient point Joel emphasized was that he felt “thankful to God that he and his wife have three kids on the path to a good education.” He noted that his oldest son aspired to be an FBI agent and was going to college in a few months to obtain a four-year degree. His other children were “well behaved,” and he was proud to say that teachers shared positive remarks about each of the three children who were students in the Lakeview City School District (LCSD).

### *Ricardo Santos*

Born to a Chilean father and a Puerto Rican mother, Ricardo Santos was originally from the Bronx but had lived in Lakeview most of his adulthood. Ricardo and his wife had four children. At the time of the focus group, the oldest

daughter was attending a local community college and the other three children were enrolled in LCSD schools. One of his daughters was a ninth grader who was participating in a college outreach program sponsored by the local four-year research university. Accordingly, the focus group that Ricardo and his wife attended on campus was facilitated by the second author. Ricardo, his wife, and their daughter were noticeably weary as they arrived late to the focus group set up specifically for students in the outreach program. We later learned that the family had gotten a flat tire on the way to the event and were unsure if they should come in late. Despite their situation, they were eager to participate and had much to share.

Similar to Joel, Ricardo commented on how “fortunate” he was because he had “great kids” who were sought after and esteemed by many classroom teachers. Overall, he felt like they had not had any bad experiences with the schooling of their children. However, he also felt strongly that this was a reflection of their upbringing and the high expectations held in their home. He stated: “I believe that if we didn’t put any expectations or were hard on them, they wouldn’t have gotten to where they are right now.” When asked to give examples of some of these expectations and practices, he mentioned keeping up with homework assignments and having study time to review academic content and prepare for upcoming tasks and tests. Moreover, Ricardo shared his own experience as a high school dropout and later a “returner” to high school. Ricardo shared that he “capped out” at high school. He did take a few courses at the local community college but did not complete a degree. He tapped into his own experiences as part of the *apoyo* (support) and *consejos* (advice) that he provided for his children in the home and school context.

### *Orlando Bermudez*

Orlando was born in Puerto Rico and had been living in Lakeview for 45 years. He said he migrated from the island to the U.S. mainland when he was “really little.” Although this move was difficult as a child, now as an adult, he felt very happy to be in Lakeview. At the time of the focus group, his youngest of five children was a sixth grader in the Lakeview City School District. His four other children lived in Florida, and he was the proud grandfather of three grandchildren.

Orlando participated in a focus group with a large group of Latina mothers who attended a family literacy program at an elementary school site (where his sixth grade daughter attended). He had a pleasant and friendly demeanor and openly shared his experiences as an elementary school student in the 1960s. He spoke about linguistic and cultural difficulties, in addition to challenges related to weather changes. As a father, Orlando acknowledged that he was very protective of his daughter because he adored her greatly. She had good grades in

elementary school, and he aspired for her to attend a middle and high school of choice focused on the arts.

## Thematic Findings

In the discussion of our thematic findings, we focus on the perspectives and experiences of Joel, Ricardo, and Orlando as they distinctly represent the themes found across the focus groups. They retold perspectives and experiences not only about aspirations for their children and “pushing for progress” (Auerbach, 2007) but also about encountering rejection, criticism, or setbacks in relation to actions and/or practices they had taken to support their children’s education. By taking on roles of *cultivators*, *critics*, *defenders*, and *advocates*, the fathers reveal complex stances rooted in U.S. Latino family epistemology (Hidalgo, 1999, 2005).

### Theme 1: Cultivators of Education as a Family and Community Affair

The fathers all talked about the importance of having high expectations and instilling Latino-centered cultural values related to respect and having a good upbringing. All fathers agreed that a good education begins in the home and talked about P–20 education as a collective (i.e., home–school–community) affair. This theme aligns with previous findings about working-class Mexican American fathers engaging in child rearing practices centered in family loyalty and broad notions of *educación* (Quiñones, 2012; Reese et al., 1995; Valdés, 1996; Villenas & Dehyle, 1999; Zarate, 2007). In a similar fashion, the fathers in our study held high expectations and aspirations for their children, emphasized the value of hard work, and gave their children advice aimed at building resiliency and encouraging school success (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007).

What is important to highlight in this theme is the idea that the fathers saw their role as a parent who cultivates education as a family and community affair across generations. This idea is significant because it evokes collectivist and family-centered practices (see Chávez, 2007; Reese et al., 1995; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011; Valdés, 1996). This family-centered collectivist orientation—emphasizing group identity, interdependence, and social responsibility—is consistent with previous research with Mexican American and Puerto Rican families in the U.S. (Hidalgo, 2005).

*Education as a Family Affair*

We draw specifically on Ricardo's experience to illustrate this theme. For example, Ricardo held high expectations for his high school daughter and was explicit about his desire for her to set a good example for her younger siblings:

Yeah, I told her, "This is why I push you more; it's not because you're the ugly duckling or whatever, but I need to make sure that—I know that they're [siblings] gonna follow you. So I need to make sure that you're the best that you can be so that they can follow you.

At one point, his daughter chose not to join the family on a vacation because she wanted to attend a pre-college activity instead. In a strategic move, Ricardo and his wife allowed her to stay behind—as part of their effort to encourage college knowledge as a family affair:

We went on vacation, and she wound up staying because she didn't wanna miss her pre-college program opportunity. So that was on her own. No doubt that our influence and my oldest's [daughter] influenced her, but she decided, and had she not done that, she wouldn't of—she's been to different colleges, and she's experienced seeing some of them. She's already looking forward to college.

Ricardo's "push" was family-centered with the hope that his daughter's college plans would promote aspirations for younger family members to also pursue a college education. Although Ricardo acknowledged that letting their middle daughter stay behind (and not go on vacation with the family) was an uncommon practice for them, he understood educational attainment as a means of cultivating "a better life" for the entire family and for future generations. Additionally, Ricardo demonstrated his families' values of equitable educational opportunities for his daughter. Deficit expectations have historically gendered young Latinas, exemplified by the term, "*marianismo*" (Sy & Brittan, 2008). *Marianismo* emphasizes the Latina woman's role as a family caretaker rather than pursuing an education, suggesting that young Latinas cannot or should not pursue both family and education goals. This conflict is also explained by Cammarota (2004) who suggests that Latinas face the challenge of "managing the contradiction between gender advancement through educational attainment and the preservation of gendered cultural norms" (p. 55). Although Ricardo may not have been consciously rejecting notions of *marianismo*, by encouraging his daughter to participate in the summer program, he was making space for her to flourish in *both* academic and family environments.

*Education as a Community Affair*

Our focus group discussion of education as a family affair led to a problem-centered discussion of education as a community affair. One of Ricardo's main concerns was the great disparity between suburban and urban schools. He positioned himself as a parent who had "seen the difference" and was concerned about notable discrepancies around standards, academic and social expectations, resources, and college access for students (and their families). He felt the Lakeview City School District, as an urban school district, was "doing the bare minimum and not giving their best effort." Even when students did graduate from city schools, he questioned to what extent graduates were "really prepared for college." In other words, he seriously questioned their college readiness:

...Once these kids are graduating, everyone is like, "Yeah, great they graduated!" But, are they really prepared for college? High school graduation is an accomplishment, but then what? I sat down with my daughter, and I said, "Listen, you graduated; I'm proud of you; you did great. But now, it's a whole different ballgame [life after graduation]. Now, I'm expecting more. Now, it starts all over. Scratch that out...now you're back to ground zero. Now, there's different expectations; it's going to be a whole different ballgame.

As noted in the passage above, Ricardo interrogated the value of a high school graduation and felt that a collective sense of low expectations for college going was a community problem that needed to be counteracted and resisted. Ricardo went on to acknowledge the influential role of parents and how misinformed upward mobility and generational thinking perpetuate low expectations:

But I know for a lot of parents, you're just the only one that graduated from high school, so you did well. You did better than us, so that's it, because they don't know any more anyways. Even if they know, they're aware that there are colleges, but that's not here [an option in the family]. Well, you're gonna have already a better job because you got a high school diploma. They don't realize, because they are not out there looking for these jobs that require college-level education. They don't know that. "Well, you're gonna get a better job because I know a lot of jobs just require a high school education, so you'll have a better job than me." That's it; that's where they top off.

Again, Ricardo's narrative points to the role of parents as cultivators of education as a family and community affair across generations. To expand on this idea from a different experience, he spoke about his oldest daughter who was attending a community college. What concerned Ricardo was that despite taking advanced placement courses in a city high school, his daughter thought her

first year courses were “really hard.” Thus, Ricardo felt that more could have been done at the high school level to better prepare his oldest daughter for postsecondary coursework. He also gave the example of a younger daughter who was taking a math class. Again, Ricardo’s concern was that she was not being challenged in the classroom.

She complains every other week: “We don’t do nothing. The students don’t let the teacher teach. The teacher don’t do nothing. We just stay there.” So yeah, my daughter looks like a star student now because she’s behaving, she’s not acting up, and she does her homework. But is she being challenged to do more? It’s sad. And I know my kids can do better and more, but they don’t get challenged.

For these reasons, Ricardo emphasized that “teachers can do more” and “schools can do more” as far as rigor in curriculum and academic preparation for college. His impression was that students in suburban schools had greater access to college readiness. Therefore, he viewed the disparity between urban and suburban schools as a communitywide issue that needed to be addressed. As a cultivator, he highlighted the individual and collective nature of education and raised issues about the quality and nature of schooling that his children were receiving. In so doing, he moved from a cultivator stance to a critic stance. It is important to note that fathers in this study were all long-term residents of the city of Lakeview and were fluent in both English and Spanish. Thus, their perspectives about family engagement could also have been shaped by linguistic acculturation (see Lopez, 2007) and dominant involvement norms (see Auerbach, 2007). This is evident in the ways in which Ricardo, for example, speaks to both the individual and collective involvement norms. For the second theme, we elaborate on the role of fathers as critics of their children’s education. To illustrate this theme, we turn our attention to Joel and Orlando as critics of racism and family–school dynamics.

## **Theme 2: Critics of Home–School–Community Dynamics**

### *Critics of Communication Practices*

All of the fathers in the study shared strategies they used to mediate learning as a process between home and school. This included traditional middle-class practices such as checking book bags, having the children review the notes they took in class, studying for tests, and providing a designated space and/or time for homework to be done at home. However, in talking about these strategies, Joel raised some concerns he had around communication between parents, the schools, and the district. For instance, he questioned the amount and quality of information given to parents (from school and district staff). In his experience,

it was “*muy pobre*” (of poor quality) and could be improved in an effort to enhance relationships between families and schools. For example, he noted that letters sent home to parents often contained names of school or district officials to contact but gave very little or no information beyond a name and number. Joel remarked: “Who is this person that I need to contact? What is their position? What do they look like? Give me a description, at least, please!” Consequently, he recommended that schools take a more person-centered, relational approach to communicate with families. To illustrate his point, Joel shared an experience he and his wife had when dealing with transportation (i.e., bus) issues for one of the children:

The school sent a letter saying, “Please call so and so at this number.” My wife calls. Then they said, “No, you have to call this other number.” Then that person says, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” So then, she had to call like four or five numbers to solve the problem. In other words, the information in the letter was not sufficient, and this led to confusion and unnecessary obstacles in the process of solving a transportation issue.

Additionally, Joel mentioned that the phone numbers given by school officials were often not helpful because the person was not there, and parents had to leave messages. To make matters worse, in his experience, the person called usually did not respond or did not call back. As a parent who wanted to advocate for his children, such communication obstacles provoked frustration rather than *confianza* (mutual trust) between parents and schools. Joel was seeking an authentic caring relationship (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) whereby school personnel would serve to help rather than deceive or frustrate. *Confianza* captures the nature of such culturally based relationships; specifically, “When individuals have *confianza* in each other, they are willing to make themselves vulnerable to each other, to share intimacies without fear of being hurt or taken for granted” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 31).

Orlando also raised concerns about communication issues, specifically with respect to interaction patterns between the cafeteria workers and the students. What bothered him was the way that the school lunch staff treated the children and, particularly, the way one adult treated his daughter. He felt that the adults working in the lunchroom were rude, disrespectful, and impatient because they yelled at the students extensively and abruptly took the food away from the students even if they were not finished eating, among other things. He felt that these actions and behaviors were disrespectful to the students.

*Critics of Pervasive Racial/Ethnic Tensions and Structural/Institutional Racism*

The racial and ethnic tensions that Orlando spoke about as he voiced his concern about the quality and nature of adult–student interactions in the school cafeteria are also important to consider. To further elaborate, Orlando stated that historical tensions between African Americans and Puerto Ricans/Latinos were at the root of the problem. In this particular case, the person in the lunchroom that he felt was “mistreating” his daughter was African American. Orlando’s statement initiated a lively conversation during the focus group interview, particularly among participants who agreed there was some prejudice and discrimination against/toward Puerto Rican students in the schooling context. In response, Orlando stated that prejudice and discrimination were not only a school-level issue but also a district-level issue. To illustrate his point, he told stories about going to the district offices on numerous occasions to take care of a few problems, only to leave feeling like the district was not responsive to his concerns. Orlando stated, “*se estan echando para atrás*” (loosely translated as “they are stepping back/not taking responsibility”). Later during the focus group when participants were recounting their frustrations with being mistreated by personnel in the Department of Social Services, Orlando stepped in to say “*Despierten! Hay mucho racismo, demasiado* (Wake up! There is a lot of racism, too much). His comment seemed to resonate with many of the parents participating in the focus group as evidenced by their nodding of heads and reflective pause time that followed his “plea” to wake up and confront the racism.

The issue of racism was not unique to this particular focus group. In fact, racism was a frequent topic of conversation across focus groups with students and parents (see Kiyama & Harris, 2010). Students shared that issues of racism impacted their identity development, peer interactions, and sense of belonging in the classroom and the school. Family members across focus groups echoed Orlando’s concerns, sharing examples of discrimination based on language and resource allocation. Family members were most passionate when sharing the discrimination that their children encountered. Spanish-dominant students in particular encountered schooling spaces that required a transition into new classrooms, new languages, new ascribed identities, and mixed reactions from school personnel that sometimes included racial bias.

In sum, Orlando and Joel expressed the need to address poor communication practices between schools/districts and families that create obstacles for parents trying to support their children’s education. Moreover, they spoke to systemic issues of invisibility and racism that shaped their role as cultivators and critics. Our third theme continues this line of thinking and elaborates on their role as defenders and advocates.

### Theme 3: Defenders, Yet Vulnerable Advocates of Educational Equity

Thus far, themes one and two speak to previous research demonstrating that U.S. Latino families value education and want to be considered sources of wisdom and guidance in their children's educational process (Auerbach, 2007; Hill & Torres, 2010; Zarate, 2007). It was clear from fathers' responses that they were not approaching social and academic situations passively. Our participants told stories of how they visited school and district offices in order to raise questions or seek changes for some aspect of their children's education. All agreed that the problem was not that Latino parents didn't care or were passive, but rather that when they voiced their concerns, the response from administrators and/or school officials was, generally speaking, nonexistent or ineffective. Thus, our findings suggest that issues of racism and Latino invisibility led to a vigilant, yet vulnerable positioning of fathers.

#### *Defenders of the Invisible*

At the school and district level, Ricardo felt that Latinos were purposefully "being kept out of the loop" since, in his view, most of the policies and practices were "catered to Blacks." Since Ricardo viewed the Latino dropout/pushout problem as a family and community affair, he felt that schools/districts needed to address this issue in a manner that not only accounted for explicit attention to Latino youth, but also institutional roles and responsibilities:

I truly believe that the Latinos are being kept out of the loop, you know what I'm saying? There's not so much for them. I think a lot of stuff is catered more for Blacks. I don't think there's a lot of help. If there is, like I said, nobody's letting us know, letting anybody know, "look, there's help for this kid." Of if they drop out, they drop out. What are they doing about it? How is the school working on, the district working on, these high school dropouts? They are not really trying to find out why these kids are dropping out. Are they doing some kind of gathering of these kids and asking them why? "Why are you dropping out? Where did we fail you?"

It is clear from the passage above that Ricardo was reminding us of the need to take individual and collective ownership of the problem. He also recognized that for the situation to improve, we also need to look at larger systemic issues at play. Ricardo drew from his own experience as a high school dropout and later a returner to school in his critique of the schools' and district's seemingly "hands off stance" toward Latino dropouts. He advocated for a more explicit, hands-on approach regarding this long-standing issue.

*Vulnerable Advocates Amidst a “Sinking” Community*

At the school and community level, Joel also felt there was “no help for Hispanics.” He attributed this problem to budget cuts that had caused parks to be closed down and school programs and sports activities to be eliminated. Joel also talked about tensions and challenges related to Latino-serving nonprofit organizations. He drew from his experiences as a coach for the Hispanic Baseball League and as an employee of a community agency serving Puerto Rican youth to emphasize repeatedly that the Latino community was “sinking.” In his view, it didn’t help that local minority-serving community agencies were competing for scarce funds and, ironically, engaging in practices that did not better serve the youth and their families (see Quiñones, Ares, Ravsi Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011). Overall, Joel’s responses suggested high levels of frustration and disappointment as a defender and advocate of his children and family within the larger context of a struggling Latino community in Lakeview. In other words, the idea of a “sinking” Latino community related to a precarious and vulnerable positioning of Puerto Rican fathers within the larger social context.

This third theme demonstrates how the fathers have high academic expectations for their children despite feeling excluded from the school community (Auerbach, 2007; Quiócho & Daoud, 2006; Zarate, 2007). Moreover, this finding illustrates that invisibility, racism, and institutional racism are significant factors influencing these fathers’ abilities to advocate for their children. All fathers took on a defensive stance when discussing the need for more explicit and responsive attention given to Latino students and families at the school, district, and community levels. Most noticeable, their vulnerability was tied to ongoing and pervasive tensions between African Americans and Latinos in the community. To this extent, this study confirms previous ethnographic research revealing a Black–Brown divide in Lakeview (Ares et al., 2011; Quiñones et al., 2011).

**Discussion**

Similar to the participants in Auerbach’s (2007) study, the fathers in our study supported their children by “monitoring, advocating, seeking information, and negotiating for access” (p. 262). To this extent, the participants reflected dominant middle-class approaches to parental involvement. However, their rationale for this kind of engagement stemmed not only from having high aspirations for their family and believing they can make a difference as a parent, but also because they did not “trust the system” and were very critical of schools and districts for a variety of reasons (Auerbach, 2007, p. 262). In

other words, although their intended goal was to increase their children's access to opportunities and improve the likelihood of better life outcomes, the fathers were "motivated by distinctive concerns linked to their social and cultural location" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 251). By engaging as cultivators, critics, defenders, and advocates, they not only wanted to be involved, but also understood middle-class forms of involvement and culture and power dynamics (Darder, 1991/2012). This suggests their involvement was a form of agency—a pushing back against the system that made them distrustful in the first place. They were intentionally playing "the game" not just because someone told them they should be involved, but because they understood that in order to progress, they had to play by the rules of the middle class, while at the same time critiquing it and their place in it.

Our findings reveal that fathers strategically mediate home and school and cultivate home- and family-centered educational practices grounded in the concept of *educación* (Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). However, the fathers do so in a critical manner that challenges traditional Latino values around *educación* that promote deference to authority and thereby foster silence and passivity toward school personnel (i.e., teachers, administrators; see Chávez, 2007, Quiñones, 2012). These fathers defend and advocate for their children in order to promote school success and monitor an educational system that they did not trust nor did they feel included in. Likewise, they acknowledged their vulnerable positioning as fathers resisting racism and invisibility in schools and in the larger neighborhood community. Hence, a common theme across the data sources is the idea of moving "*contra la corriente*" or going against the current within the context of a larger community that is perceived to be *hundiendo*, or sinking.

### Study Limitations and Strengths

The limitations of this study are also reflective of its contributions. For example, while we have chosen to represent findings in the form of three composite characters based on eight fathers, a seemingly low participant number, the findings illustrate the rich contributions these fathers offer the literature. Furthermore, although mothers represented over half of the participants in the larger research study and their voices are not presented within this article, we have done so intentionally, as research specifically on the role of father engagement is continually sparse. Moreover, although our findings provide us with a better understanding of fathers who are invested in their children's social and academic success, it does little to expand our knowledge about fathers of children who drop out or are pushed out of high school. This is a limitation given that the Latino Education Task Force originally sought our participation

(as university researchers) for the purpose of including family and youth perspectives around the issue of chronic, high dropout rates of Latino youth in Lakeview. Yet, while these fathers cannot pinpoint specific reasons Latino students drop out of the local school district (as their children have successfully progressed), their concerns about schooling practices point to various factors that contribute to a process of dropping out—limited educational resources, negative interactions with school personnel, and a struggling community context. These overall factors help us to better understand both the role that Puerto Rican fathers can play in this particular community *and* the influences that students are negotiating as they work to persist in school.

### Implications

Our findings reveal how Puerto Rican fathers in the U.S. operate and construct knowledge within the intersecting spaces of history, culture, social class, and structural/institutional racism. Considered together, these participants remind us that fathers are not only vulnerable as individuals within a family/household social unit, but also as individuals within a collective group facing numerous challenges as Puerto Rican parents. A troubling reality is that our analysis surfaced a kind of vulnerability that we describe through the metaphorical imagery captured in our title. Our findings suggest fathers are moving *contra la corriente* (against the current) within a “sinking” community context. Their overall stances speak to complex ways that historical and structural dynamics shape family–school engagement processes.

Our findings have implications for Latino family engagement and the need for collaboration and community action aimed at “adjusting the sails” as we move toward educational equity (Pedraza & Rivera, 2005). However, we continue to be faced with top-down initiatives premised on middle-class ideologies and deficit notions of Latino parental engagement, rather than empowering and advocacy-centered approaches to bicultural parental engagement (see Hong, 2011; Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004; Olivos, Jiménez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). As a case in point, just recently the Lakeview City School District kicked off an initiative to spur father involvement with the hope that more fathers step up and become more involved in the classroom. While we commend this initiative focused on fathers, we question their approach to parental involvement and hope that the workforce and educational training component of this initiative not only includes custodial assistance and GED training (as suggested in the local media), but also responsive and advocacy-centered approaches to engagement as a family and community affair, one which addresses issues of individual and institutional racism and invisibility, as demonstrated in our findings. Efforts

to engage families are often one-directional and neglect to include community members, organizations, and/or programs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Additionally, our findings suggest important implications for future research. Given our small sample size and the lack of educational research focusing on father engagement, future studies should include additional focus group and individual interviews with Latino fathers. Future research should explicitly focus on the ways in which engagement has been racialized, classed, and gendered. In addition, because our sample included fathers who were established in the local community and were fluent English speakers, we encourage future researchers to include fathers who have recently (im)migrated to the studied locales, as their connection to educational systems will likely be influenced by home cultures and language. We cannot allow for a lack of research in this area to perpetuate an assumption that fathers are not involved in the educational lives of their children. This initial study should encourage others to continue to (re)define the diverse ways in which fathers engage with education both inside and outside of school walls.

### **Conclusion**

As educational researchers concerned with families in schools and educational equity (Auerbach, 2007), we wanted to provide the reader with a greater understanding of the roles that Latino fathers *already* play in supporting their children's education. Our study explored Latino fathers' understanding of their roles in supporting the social and academic development of their children. We also wanted to know if they felt excluded from the school community and what recommendations they had for improving the educational status of Latinos in their local school system.

The Puerto Rican fathers in our study took a critical, hands-on approach to their role as contributors to their children's education. They retold perspectives and experiences not only about "pushing for progress" but also encountering rejection, criticism, or setbacks in relation to actions and/or practices they had taken to support their children's education. It is clear from the fathers' narratives that the community context is a vital element that must not be overlooked. Thus, future efforts to engage family members, and fathers in particular, should be co-constructed amongst school personnel, families, and community members if we are to support Latino fathers. Rather than moving against the current, we can adjust the sails and garner the winds toward a better education for Latino children and their families.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>While recognizing the gendered nature of the terms Latino (male) and Latina (female), the term Latino will be used throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup>There are a proportion of Latina/o students who neither graduate nor dropout four years after entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Data is collected five and six years after entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Data suggests that dropout outcomes increased one and two years after students' expected graduation (Kiyama & Harris, 2010).

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