

# **A Squandered Resource: The Divestment of Mexican Parental Involvement in a New Gateway State**

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## **Abstract**

Parental involvement plays an important role in the academic success of children. Schools in new gateway states where there has not been a longstanding tradition of immigration often lack the cultural knowledge and linguistic resources necessary to serve immigrant youth and their families effectively. By examining the experiences of Mexican parents with Mexican schools and contrasting them to their experiences with U.S. schools in a new gateway state, the author provides insights into some of the challenges of eliciting the involvement of Mexican parents in a way schools deem appropriate. The constraint of English proficiency as a prerequisite for engaged parental involvement in U.S. schools is highlighted throughout the author's findings. Suggestions for school practices and teacher training that would promote Mexican parents' involvement are provided.

Key Words: immigrant parents, Mexican schools, parental involvement, language barriers, Latino families

## **Introduction**

Latinos comprise the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States, and their academic success has significant implications for the future of this country (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Although dropout rates

for Latinos have decreased considerably, they continued to be the highest of any ethnic group at 14% in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2014c). In addition, the academic attainment gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanic, White students persists (Pew Research Center, 2009). Educators and researchers alike have grappled with the myriad reasons for the underperformance of Latinos in U.S. schools. In an attempt to serve this growing population, schools have had to contend with both cultural and language differences in the midst of increased high-stake testing and accountability practices. There is a tendency for educators who are frustrated by the situation to turn to Latino parents as the source of the problem, claiming that they are not adequately invested in their children's education (De Gaetano, 2007; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Olivos, Jiménez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Ramirez, 2003; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). According to the National Survey of Latinos: Education conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2004, Latino parents themselves were more likely than White or African American parents to say that the achievement gap between non-Hispanic, White students and Latino students was a result of too many Latino parents being unwilling to push their children to work hard (Pew Research Center, 2004).

Significant academic achievement can be attained when parents and family members are involved in a student's education (August & Hakuta, 1997; Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and some research suggests that parental involvement plays an even greater role in the academic achievement of Latino students than it does for White, non-Hispanic students (Darder, 1991; Delgado-Gaitán, 2004; Zuniga, 2006). In order to better serve Latino students, it is imperative that educators are informed about the ways in which culture and language influence the parental involvement practices of the families they serve. If schools want to engage and involve Latino parents, they cannot continue to rely on traditional parental involvement practices initially designed to meet the needs of U.S.-born parents who speak English.

By comparing the participants' experiences with schools in Mexico to schools in North Carolina, educators in new gateway states may gain insights into how an increase in linguistic and cultural diversity necessitates a change in the ways that schools work to foster parental involvement. This article will examine the following questions through a qualitative case study: How did Mexican parents and students experience parental involvement in their native country? How did these experiences differ from what they have experienced in North Carolina? What are these families' overall impressions of the expectations that schools in North Carolina have of them regarding their involvement in the schools? What have been the most salient challenges in meeting these expectations? By

better understanding the experiences of Mexican parents in their home country and the challenges they have faced in North Carolina concerning parental involvement, schools—particularly those in new gateway states—will be better positioned to create practices that foster stronger home–school connections. Strong home–school connections and the symmetrical communication that is needed to create these connections are at the core of implementing what Moll and his colleagues called a “participatory pedagogy” that draws on the funds of knowledge that all students bring to the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

### **Parental Involvement, Latino Families, and U.S. Schools**

The perception that Mexican students do not succeed in U.S. schools because they come from families that do not value education harks back to the cultural deprivation literature of the 1960s (Hawkes & Frost, 1966; Hellmuth, 1967). Valdés (1997) refers to this explanation for student failure as the “cultural background explanation” and states that scholars who take this perspective fail to recognize or examine the different treatment that children from minority backgrounds receive. In response to the charge that there is something culturally deficient about Latino students and their families, many scholars have argued that the unwillingness on the part of U.S. schools to meet the diverse needs of culturally and linguistically marginalized students has discouraged their families from engaging with the schools (Doucet, 2011; Durand & Perez, 2013; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Ramirez, 2003; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Wortham, Murrillo, & Hamann, 2002). Many parental involvement programs have been designed around assimilationist models in which parents are marginalized and expected to abandon their cultural stance (Gitlin, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003). Not only are these parents asked to leave behind their cultural perspectives on child-rearing and education when they enter U.S. schools, they are often subject to parental education programs which deem their parenting skills as insufficient and try to “fix” them by holding up a White, middle-class model as being superior (De Gaetano, 2007; Gibson, 1995; Valdés, 1996).

Both qualitative and quantitative studies examining Mexican parental involvement and the value placed on education within Mexican families have illustrated that education is highly valued in these families, and parental involvement is clearly evident (Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Goldenberg et al., 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Lopez, 2001; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014; Ramos, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Vera et al., 2012). Furthermore, a national survey of Latinos conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2004 highlighted the ways that Latino families value

education. Latino parents were more likely to attend a PTA meeting than either their White or African American counterparts. They were more likely to provide daily homework help than White parents, and they were more likely to meet with their children's teachers on a monthly basis than were their White counterparts. This research demonstrates that Latino parents take part in traditional parental involvement practices.

It is important to note, however, that parental involvement manifests itself differently across different class and cultural groups. When our conceptualization of parental involvement is limited solely to the ways that parents support the schools—participating in school fundraisers, attending back-to-school nights, chaperoning class trips—the ways that many less visible families involve themselves in their children's education are missed. Jeynes (2010) found that it is the more subtle aspects of parental involvement that best support the educational outcome of a child. Jeynes argues that a loving home, academic expectations accompanied with consistent support, and healthy parent-child communication are the most vital forms of parental involvement.

Valencia and Black (2002), in a case study of transgenerational parental involvement, examined the internal and external acts of educational involvement on the part of Mexican families. Their findings illustrated that, although not necessarily in accordance with White, middle-class concepts of parental involvement, the Mexican families interviewed were actively involved in the education of their children and conveyed strong academic expectations which were often transmitted through personal testimony. Parents and grandparents used their own lack of educational opportunity and the menial jobs they had to take as testament to the importance of educational attainment.

Poza, Brooks, and Valdés (2014) examined the different ways that Latino immigrant parents participate in their children's education and found that Latino parents' involvement often bypasses the schools; thus, Latino parents do not receive credit for their involvement. Their findings highlighted the ways that Latino parents seek information from individuals and organizations that have experience successfully navigating the public schools, attend events and participate in organizations they believe to be supportive of their children's education, and augment or alter their children's educational experience to improve the outcome. Fundamental to their findings was the sense of agency that the parents exhibited in overcoming the myriad barriers placed before them.

Valdés (1996), in a seminal three-year qualitative study of 10 Mexican families, examined how parents were preparing their children to function within the family, the outside community, and the school setting. The original objective of her study was to understand how multiple factors, including language, culture, and socioeconomics, affected the academic performance of Mexican

children. Her findings illuminated the cultural disconnect that existed between U.S. schools in border towns of the Southwest and many Mexican families. Parents were significantly involved in the education of their children as it related to the moral well-being of their children, family participation, and respect for others. The Mexican parents in her study saw education as it pertained to academic achievement to be the domain of the schools and teachers.

Jeynes (2012), in a meta-analysis that examined different programs designed to increase parental involvement, found that the most effective programs were those that fostered collaboration between the home and school. Jeynes (2012) recommended that schools might make better use of their resources by working harder to support parents at home, instead of focusing their energies on getting parents to support teachers at school. Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis (2012) examined three highly successful parental involvement projects in California, two of which were spearheaded by Latino parents and one that worked in tandem with a community organization. The parents met independently of the schools and were able to discuss—in Spanish if they desired—issues that directly impacted the education of their children. The parents experienced an increased sense of agency as a result of their participation, which led to more open partnerships between the parents and the schools. Their study demonstrates the importance of providing a space for parents to have a voice in the schools their children attend. Unfortunately, parents, particularly minority parents, are often not given a voice in schools. Ferrara (2009) examined the attitudes and perceptions of school administrators, teachers, and other school personnel and found that, when surveyed, parents were often viewed as “non-essential members of the school team” (p. 140).

### **Theoretical Framework: Care Theory and Subtractive Schooling**

This study is grounded theoretically in both Noddings’ theory of care (1984, 2005) and Valenzuela’s concept of subtractive schooling (1999). I was drawn to the literature on care theory after one research participant conflated parental involvement with the term “care.” As she saw it, the desire of schools in the United States to foster Mexican parental involvement was a direct result of the school’s level of care for Mexican students. She believed the schools did not engage Mexican parents in dialogue or try to elicit their involvement because they did not care about Mexican children. Noddings (1984, 2005) cites dialogue as one of the essential components of care. When no dialogue exists between Mexican parents and American teachers, Mexican parents and students are left feeling uncared about as an effect.

Stemming from Cummins’ idea of subtractive bilingualism, which divests native language skills from non-English speaking children (Cummins, 1981,

2000), subtractive schooling as defined by Valenzuela (1999) is schooling that divests Mexican students of both their language and culture. Valenzuela states:

School subtracts resources from youth in two major ways. First, it dismisses their definition of education which is not only thoroughly grounded in Mexican culture, but also approximates the optimal definition of education advanced by Noddings (1984) and other caring theorists. Second, subtractive schooling encompasses subtractively assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language. (p. 20)

The current article draws from Valenzuela's work, which focused on the effects of subtractive schooling on Mexican students, to show that a similar phenomenon occurs when schools marginalize Mexican parents and erode the role they play in the education of their children.

### **Research Site**

North Carolina has experienced a significant demographic shift as a result of immigration. From 1990 to 2010, there was a 943% increase in the Latino population in North Carolina, and Latinos made up 25% of the state's population growth in the last two decades (Zabala, 2013). The majority of North Carolina's Latino population is Mexican or of Mexican descent. In an attempt to serve this growing population, schools have been confronted with many new issues: cultural differences, language differences, and a rapid demographic shift that upset a longstanding racial binary between African American and European American students (Wainer, 2004). Unlike traditional gateway states, North Carolina does not have a previous history with large scale immigration. Furthermore, small cities and rural areas have been destination points for many immigrants settling in the new gateway states of the South (Marrow, 2011). The aim of this qualitative study is to give voice to the personal experiences of the Mexican families who are part of this new Latino diaspora in North Carolina (Wortham et al., 2002).

### **Study Design**

The objective of this research was to investigate the participants' experiences of parental involvement in Mexico and in the U.S. By examining the experiences of Mexican parents in Mexican schools, U.S. educators may gain insights into why many Mexican parents have erroneously been seen as uninvolved and why U.S. teachers have not been successful in eliciting the involvement of Mexican parents in a way that is deemed appropriate by U.S. educators. The

ultimate goal of this research was to create more effective, culturally responsive parental involvement practices in U.S. schools for Mexican families.

The primary data collection strategy was the semi-structured interview (Spradley, 1979). An initial five interviews were conducted in 2006. In an attempt to further explore and expand on the initial findings, I conducted seven more interviews in the spring of 2013. All interviews were conducted in North Carolina. Given the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this study, the study's findings are not meant to be generalizable to all Mexican immigrant populations. Instead, the goal of this research is to explore the participants' perspectives and experiences in a new gateway state in the Southeastern U.S. It is my hope that the following qualitative data reveal the regional challenges schools and non-English-speaking families face when trying to foster stronger parental engagement practices.

### **Research Participants**

As a former ESL teacher, I had extensive connections to Mexican families with children in the area. Because I was interested in families with children who had attended schools in Mexico and the United States, I used the purposeful selection process of criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). The initial five research participants were three students who had attended both U.S. and Mexican schools and a Mexican mother and father who had children who attended both U.S. and Mexican schools (see Table 1). One of the female student participants was the child of the married couple. The students, one male and two female, had attended and graduated from high school in North Carolina after completing their primary and middle grades in Mexico. Despite their label of "limited English proficiency," two of the three students graduated with honors and were on the college track throughout their high school career. At the time of the interviews, none of the students were enrolled in college. The students all had younger siblings or cousins who were attending middle or elementary schools in the U.S. Because the high school graduates had a better command of English than their parents, they were often called upon to navigate the schools for their younger family members. Their experiences with U.S. schools were more informed than those of their parents—they had more contact with teachers and administrators—so I included their perspectives and insights with my research.

The two parents interviewed in 2006 had raised their children until adolescence in Mexico, at which time they moved their family to the U.S. for reasons of economic necessity. While in Mexico, the participants' socioeconomic status ranged from lower-middle to middle class. In the U.S., the participants are lower working class. Despite the present socioeconomic status of the participants,

four of the five interviewees highlighted their advanced level of education and sophistication in contrast to the majority of Mexican immigrants, whom they described as coming from rural backgrounds with limited education.

Table 1. Summary of Research Participants—2006

Family Relation	Languages Spoken	# of Children	Yrs. w/ Children in Mexican Schools	Type of Schools/ State Attended in Mexico	Yrs. w/ Children in U.S. Schools
Mother	Spanish	3	11	Urban/Coahuila	4
Father	Spanish	3	11	Urban/Coahuila	4
			Yrs. in Mexican Schools		Yrs. in U.S. Schools
Female w/ younger cousins	Spanish English	N/A	10	Urban/Coahuila	4
Male w/ younger cousins and sibling	Spanish English	N/A	11	Urban/Coahuila	3
Female w/ younger siblings and nieces	Spanish English	N/A	9	Rural/ Aguascalientes	4

The 2013 research participants were five mothers and two fathers (see Table 2). All participants had children who had previously attended schools in Mexico and were currently attending schools in North Carolina. With the exception of one father, who had himself immigrated to North Carolina at the age of 16 and attended high school for three years in two public high schools, all of the 2013 research participants had completed their schooling in Mexico. All of the 2013 research participants had children attending schools ranging from elementary to high school.



Table 2. Summary of Research Participants—2013

Family Relation	Languages Spoken	# of Children	Yrs. w/Children in Mexican Schools	Type of Schools/State Attended in Mexico	Yrs. w/Children in U.S. Schools
Mother	Spanish	3	14	Urban/Jalisco	5
Father	Spanish	3	14	Urban/Jalisco	5
Father	Spanish/English	2	2	Rural/Aguascalientes	3
Mother	Spanish	2	2	Rural/Aguascalientes	2
Mother	Spanish	1	3	Rural/Aguascalientes	4
Mother	Spanish	5	11	Rural/Aguascalientes	9
Mother	Spanish	9	12	Rural/Aguascalientes	12

### Entry

In my role as a K–12 ESL teacher and coordinator, I worked in the community for almost a decade starting in the late 1990s, establishing connections to many Mexican families. Former students from my first years of teaching as well as the parents of more recent students were able to connect me to appropriate research participants for this study. I was not working in the schools at the same time that I conducted this research; however, my experiences as a former ESL teacher helped to inform this study. I was often one of only a couple of teachers who spoke Spanish in the schools where I worked, and I quickly became the Spanish-speaking parents' go-to person for problems such as difficulties with homework, unsupportive teachers, medical issues, scheduling of classes, and issues around school cancellations due to inclement weather. Although I am not a native speaker of Spanish nor am I of Mexican origin, my connection to the students and families I worked with awarded me insights into what it is like to navigate a monolingual school when you don't speak the language. While one could argue—and quite fairly—that my lens is biased as a result of working with Spanish-speaking families in this capacity, it should also be noted that I have considered these issues from multiple lenses, all of which

are informed by the various subject positions that I have occupied: teacher, administrator, researcher, advocate, community organizer, and teacher educator.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The interviews in 2006 and 2013 were structured around the same questions, and participants from both time periods resided in the same county of North Carolina. I conducted all but one of the parent interviews in Spanish, as one bilingual father preferred to speak with me in English. The interviews with students who had recently graduated were conducted in both Spanish and English, as they were accustomed to translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014) when speaking with other bilinguals. The interviews ranged from 30–90 minutes in length. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes; however, one of the 2006 interviews was conducted in a restaurant, and one in 2013 was conducted in a café. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I translated the Spanish interviews initially and had them back translated by a native Spanish speaker to ensure that no nuanced speech acts had been lost in the initial translation. The transcripts were then coded using indigenous typologies (Patton, 2002) in which categories were created based on the participants' responses and understandings. The data was analyzed recursively throughout the study, and themes that reoccurred regularly and demonstrated both internal and external plausibility were included in the study's findings (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2002).

### **Parental Involvement in Mexico**

Throughout the 2006 and 2013 interviews, participants described a sense of shared responsibility between parents and teachers in Mexico. A child's development was not compartmentalized into academic, social, and emotional realms, but rather seen more holistically by Mexican educators and parents (Greenfield, Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Quiroz, 2001). Participants spoke of there being consistent communication between parents and teachers. At the primary level, parents met with teachers almost daily and a minimum of once a month at the secondary level. One mother of three spoke of communicating with her son's teacher on a daily basis to informally monitor his academic progress as well as his overall behavior. When asked to elaborate on her experience with her son's school in Mexico, she said:

It was better. It was really good. Of course there were a lot of students in one class, but for me it was better. It was good because I could help him with his work. We spent a lot of time with the teachers. I could ask the

teacher what my son needed daily because there was a lot of communication. How is he doing in math? Spanish? Because one teacher taught all the subjects, so every day I could check. What does my son need? If my son needs something, please just send me a note or call me. There was a lot of communication between us. I would help my kids with their work and bring them to school every day. For me it was really good.

Several mothers reminisced about the benefits of having their children come home for lunch and then return for afternoon classes, stating that this allowed teachers to inform them if their child had not completed work or had misbehaved. Built into the academic structure of the day was fluidity between home and school. By having students come home for lunch and then return to the school in the afternoon, a problem could be addressed and rectified in the same day. The school, particularly at the primary level, was seen as the students' second home. One father spoke of how teachers often disciplined students in a similar manner as a parent would. Most of the participants described a harmonious relationship where all parties had the best interest of the child in mind. One of the research participants who attended a particularly small rural school had this to say about the relationship between teachers and parents:

You see, in Mexico, all the time the parents like the teachers. They are always nice with them and everything like that. If they say something like "your child did this bad thing," they don't get mad at them. They are like, "Oh, okay. I'll have to tell him not to do it again."... The majority of the people love the teachers, and they invite them to their house. They are close, maybe because it is a small community.

There was a sense of collaboration between the teachers and parents. Parents did not contradict or challenge teachers' judgments but rather supported teachers by attending to their children's physical and social development in order to ensure that their children were ready to learn.

In the majority of the interviews, parents spoke of the school's expectations of them as having more to do with teaching children the importance of good behavior and making sure they were punctual, clean, and well nourished. While some of the mothers talked about helping students with school work, they did not see it as their responsibility to ensure that their child knew their letters by a certain age or had been read to consistently before attending school.

One mother talked about monthly meetings with her children's teachers in Mexico during which the school principal would also address any concerns the parents might have regarding students' academic or social performance. New school programs and policies would be discussed at these monthly meetings. The expectation that teachers and administrators had for parents was that they

would support their children at home by ensuring that they completed their school work and attended class regularly. If there were additional expectations or needs that the school held for the parents, they would be brought up at these monthly meetings. In the following description of these meetings, the mother highlights the sense of collaboration that the schools were able to foster with the parents:

We had meetings with the teachers every month. All the parents would come to the classroom. We would ask questions to the teacher or the director. The director would tell us how our children were doing and check to make sure that we didn't need anything. It was a good experience.

This mother's account demonstrates the sense of collaboration that existed among the parents, teachers, and administrators. A structure was provided by the schools to foster two-way communication through which expectations were clearly stated and parents were provided the space to obtain any necessary clarification.

Parents also spoke of having a significant role in the running of their children's schools in Mexico. At the primary level, many of the Mexican parents interviewed talked about their participation in organizing school festivities and helping out with some of the school's administrative duties, such as acting as the school treasurer. At the secondary level, parents were expected to attend the oral exams of their children and to meet with teachers regularly to receive quarterly report cards. In comparing the opportunities for parental involvement in Mexico with the U.S., one mother had this to say:

I felt here they don't involve the parents too much in what the school is doing. The parents have to get involved not because the teachers are asking them to. In Mexico, it is the opposite. The school gets the parents involved.

### **Education vs. *Educación***

The melting of boundaries between home and school is in keeping with the Mexican conception of *educación*. The primary focus of an American education is to equip students with the skills necessary for material survival. The Mexican concept of education is much broader in scope; it entails moral, social, and relational aspects that are more concerned with one's conduct in the world than the acquisition of marketable skills (Valdés, 1996, Valenzuela, 1999; Villenas, 2002). To be *bien educado* (well educated) is to be a highly moral individual who exhibits family loyalty and preserves cultural values. Developing this broader idea of education in a child requires the joint effort of family and school.

When asked what the teachers and administrators in Mexico expected from the parents, the majority of parents cited nonacademic tasks such as walking their children to school, getting them to bed early, making sure they were bathed and had clean clothes, providing a nutritious lunch, and teaching them the importance of being respectful to teachers. One of the mothers whose daughter attended first and second grade in an urban school in Mexico gave the following description when asked about her involvement in her daughter's education in Mexico:

We went to school together. I brought her lunch and participated in all the events that they had....We were expected to educate them in the house and send them to school with clean nails, clean clothes, and combed hair.

Only one mother interviewed mentioned being expected to read and practice counting with her kindergartener. All parents mentioned the expectation that they would “support” their children so that they could learn in school; however, this support did not necessarily entail advocating for their child in school, monitoring their child's academic progress, or playing a role in the development of school policies via parent–teacher organizations and other school committee work—all of which are typical expectations of parental involvement for American middle-class parents (Epstein, 1995; Moreno, Lewis-Menchaca, & Rodriguez, 2011). In Mexico, “support” was understood to mean that parents would create home practices that were conducive to students being ready to learn and well behaved when at school. Among many Mexican parents, a distinction is made between *educar* [to educate] and *enseñar* [to teach]. Teaching is left to the teachers, while educating a child on proper behavior and cultural expectations is the responsibility of the family (Rodriguez-Brown, 2010).

### **Parental Involvement in the United States**

The experiences of parental involvement in Mexico contrasted sharply with what these families found in U.S. schools. All participants felt strongly that in U.S. schools the onus of involving oneself in the school fell primarily on the parents. This was true for parents of children in primary through secondary school. Unlike their experiences in Mexico, they felt that the schools did little to help facilitate their participation. Parents were not kept abreast of school events other than the issuing of report cards, which could be easily circumvented by a devious child. Neither of the 2006 parent interviewees spoke of feeling any type of partnership with the schools in educating their children. One young Mexican woman who had recently graduated from a U.S. high

school commented that when parents were notified, it was usually to inform them of something negative their child had done, saying:

In here, they just call them [parents] when you get in a fight, when you've skipped class, when you've done something bad. But if we didn't do anything, they don't call them. I remember in Mexico, when the teachers used to call them. You know, so they could see the grades, and if I was doing bad the teachers had to talk to them, and my parents would make me study more, and here I never felt that my parents were pressuring me to study more because they didn't know how I was doing.

The 2013 interviewees, in general, had more positive things to say about the quality of education their children received in U.S. schools. Two mothers made mention of the individualized attention they felt their children were receiving. A father of three said that he was happy because his children were progressing well in their education as a result of the help they received from their teachers. Another father of an elementary student commented on the higher standards of U.S. schools, particularly as these standards related to teacher preparation. He had this to say when comparing his daughter's elementary school in the U.S. to the one she attended in Mexico:

The level was a lot lower in terms of education...It was a small school, and I don't know if a lot of people had gone to university in the school she was in. My guess is that about 98% of the teachers had not.

Parents also appreciated that the schools did not require parents to buy uniforms, pay tuition, or provide transportation, which were often requirements for the parents when enrolling their children in Mexican schools.

### **Parental Involvement as an English-Only Endeavor**

In both the 2006 and 2013 interviews, the issue of language was repeatedly raised when discussing parental involvement in U.S. schools. All participants saw parental involvement as an English-only endeavor. Parents who were not able to make themselves heard in English had little hope of communicating with teachers and administrators. Furthermore, the skills and cultural capital of Mexican parents who did not speak English were rarely tapped into as a result of the language barrier. Parents, who were more than willing to help out with school events, were rarely asked to do so because they didn't speak English. One young woman who had recently graduated from high school and had three younger siblings currently attending U.S. schools said of her mother in reference to school functions:

My mom always wants to go. She always wants to help, but she can't because of the language. So she just helps with what she can, like selling tickets or something.

One of the fathers interviewed in 2013 noted that the only information sent home in Spanish were surveys requesting parents' feedback on the school's performance. The rest of the information was sent home in English. The district where his child attended school served 1,736 designated English language learners, and just less than 12% of its student population was Hispanic.

Two of the mothers interviewed in 2013 were unaware of any opportunities to become more involved in their children's schools. Neither of these mothers spoke English, and the schools that their children attended had never provided an interpreter for them. They both claimed to have little contact with their children's teachers as a result of not being able to communicate with them. When asked about the expectations of her daughter's school, one of the mothers said, "I don't know. There is very little communication with my daughter's teachers because I don't speak English and they don't speak Spanish."

In direct contrast, one mother spoke positively about her experiences with her daughter's teachers and stated that she attended meetings and events regularly. She did not speak English nor did her daughter's teachers speak Spanish, but an interpreter was always provided. She was the only parent interviewed, from either 2006 or 2013, to have been provided an interpreter by the schools. She was not able to give any particular reason why she was provided an interpreter; nevertheless, her positive experiences with the schools and her involvement in her daughter's education underscore the importance of schools working to bridge the language barrier.

In 2013, when I asked a mother of nine whose children have been in U.S. schools since 2000 whether the schools had gotten more responsive to the needs of English language learners and their families, she replied:

No, but things have gotten better because I have more experience with the schools and my children can fix their own problems now that they are older, but not because the schools provide any more help. Also my older children, who now speak English, can help. Things have gotten easier.

It is important to note that the improvement that she experienced was not a result of the responsiveness of the school district to better meet the needs of Spanish-speaking parents, but rather her older children's acquisition of English and the length of time that she has had children in U.S. schools.

One father cited time, not language, as the major barrier to being more involved in his daughter's education. When asked what the major challenge was in staying involved in his daughter's education, he responded:

Time, because I work. There are a lot of things that I probably don't do. I am the only one that can get involved because my wife does not

speak that much English, and she doesn't know what is going on.... The few times that I have helped my daughter at school, I really saw a lot of progress.

While he was aware of the importance of chaperoning field trips, attending meetings with teachers, and helping his daughter with her school work, as the only English speaker in the family and the primary money maker, he often did not have the time to be as involved in his daughter's education as he would have liked. He complained about having to read all the papers that the school sent home in English and translate them for his wife who did not speak English. His wife, who worked part-time and had more free time to attend school functions, did not attend because of her discomfort with being in an English-only setting, leaving the bulk of parental involvement to fall on her husband.

One student who was interviewed in 2006 reflected on the role that language played in her mother's ability to help her younger siblings in the U.S. with their school work compared to the help she received when she was their age in Mexico.

When I was in Mexico, my mother always helped me with my homework, all the time, and now she cannot help my sisters because she doesn't understand. She doesn't speak English. Like right now, my sister is missing some homework assignments because she doesn't know how to help her. It is really difficult because she always used to help us.

If schools do not attempt to bridge the language barrier, then they are promoting subtractive schooling for their students who do not come from English-speaking families. Not only are these students being deprived of the benefit of their parents' involvement, but the schools are depriving themselves of what could be a valuable resource. Where there was a sense of fluidity and partnership between Mexican parents and the Mexican schools their children attended, the majority of the Mexican parents interviewed viewed the U.S. schools their children attended as an English-only community, where the talents of students and parents alike went unrecognized if they were not expressed in English. The result of this monolingual school community was that parents who spoke Spanish were often unaware of the schools' expectations of them. When asked what the schools could do to increase parental involvement, one of the female participants from the 2006 interviews had this to say:

Maybe if there were more people who speak Spanish—I think the parents cannot learn English because it is too late. If nobody speaks Spanish, how can they do things...because, I mean if there were more people who speak Spanish, they would know what the parents like, what they can do, and what they are interested in. Parents would participate more.



### **The Constraints of an Unauthorized Status**

In addition to the obstacle that language presented, the unauthorized legal status of many of the Mexican parents was seen as a hurdle in the way of promoting honest parent–school dialogue. Mexican parents who are not authorized to be in the country hold a precarious position in U.S. society (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teransishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Highly conscious of this position, many unauthorized parents see the schools as representative of a higher government authority and therefore as a place to be avoided. Given this perception, these parents are unlikely to force the issue of communication and dialogue. One young Mexican man interviewed in 2006 said the following about this situation:

The parents are immigrants; they are illegal, so they have that limit to come out and say something or do something because they are afraid, and maybe nothing is going to happen, but they are afraid that something is going to happen, and they are going to be sent back to Mexico.

While this sentiment is more than likely still a reality for many unauthorized parents, especially those who have recently immigrated to the United States, it was not raised in any of the 2013 interviews as a factor that would limit parental involvement. Although it is impossible to ascertain for certain why this was not raised as a challenge in the 2013 interviews, it is possible that immigrants are more informed about their rights as a result of the growing number of activists working toward immigration reform in the Southeast. There has also been a decrease in the number of unauthorized immigrants following the economic downturn of 2007 (Pew Research Center, 2014a).

### **School Expectations of Mexican Parents as an Act of Caring**

Overall, the Mexican parents interviewed either did not feel that the schools expected anything of them in regard to parental involvement, or they felt that they were unable to fulfill the schools' expectations because of their limited proficiency in English. They did, however, recognize that their involvement was very important to the academic welfare of their children and tried to overcome the obstacles placed before them. The solicitation of their involvement in the schools their children attended in Mexico was seen as an act of caring. In contrast, the seeming lack of interest in Mexican parental involvement on the part of U.S. schools was seen as a lack of caring. When asked what she thought American teachers expected of parents, one young woman had this to say, "I don't know, nothing. I don't know, probably, yeah, some teachers care. They would like the parents to have some connection. Yeah, I think some care."

Much of what came out of the interviews was the participants' belief that as long as Mexican parents were unable to initiate or participate in a dialogue with the schools in English, they would continue to be uncared for and further marginalized. This sentiment was equally as strong in the 2006 interviews as in 2013; however, the latter interviewees were more aware of opportunities to be involved in the schools but felt that they could not take advantage of these opportunities because they did not speak English. The following Mexican mother's commentary about the expectations and opportunities for parental involvement was reiterated by the majority of the 2013 interviewees: "There are [opportunities], but because of the language, there is not a lot of communication. I don't go much because I can't communicate."

By putting the onus of initiating parent-school dialogue on Mexican parents, the schools described by the research participants in this study were essentially requiring Mexican parents to learn English and to assimilate to the prevalent Anglo culture. Although some of the parents interviewed were able to learn enough English to negotiate the school system, the majority of first generation Mexican parents often cannot (Pew Research Center, 2014b). When Mexican parents are neither involved in the formal education of their children nor given a voice in important educational decisions affecting their children, subtractive schooling occurs (Valenzuela, 1999).

According to Noddings, "Responsiveness is at the heart of caring....It is obvious that caring demands a response from us. When we care for others, we attend and respond as nearly as we can to expressed needs" (2005, p. xxv). When schools define parental involvement as an English-only endeavor, they send a message to their language minority students that they are not cared for and that their families' voices aren't valued.

### **The Process of Reification—It's a "Hispanic Thing"**

Whether parents were aware of the schools' expectations of them and unable to meet these expectations because of the language barrier, or whether they were unaware of the schools' expectations because of their limited communication with schools as a consequence of the language barrier, the end result is the same: Teachers and administrators are more likely to view Mexican parents as not placing as much importance on education as their English-speaking counterparts who are more visibly active in the schools their children attend. If this misperception were limited to how individual parents were viewed, rather than how an entire group—that is, Mexican parents—were viewed, the effects would not be as detrimental. However, because all of these parents share the same nationality, the tendency by both school personnel and parents, including Mexican parents, is to view the lack of visible Mexican parental involvement

as a cultural trait (Olivos et al., 2011; Valencia & Black, 2002). The following is a Mexican father's articulation of the process by which the perceived lack of Mexican parental involvement is reified into a cultural trait of indifference on the part of "Hispanic" parents concerning their children's education:

Father: Usually, most people I know, all they want to do is send their kids [to school], and that's it, and let teachers do their job, and that's all. I don't see a lot of people getting really involved in their kids' education...you don't think it's a Hispanic thing, sending their kids and that's all?

Author: What do you think?

Father: Yeah, maybe.

If schools in new gateway states embrace an English-only culture by conducting the majority of school business in English, then it is understandable that parents who don't speak English would not involve themselves in school functions. Furthermore, when asked what it meant to provide support for the education of one's child, the majority of the Mexican parents interviewed provided examples related to teaching their children to be respectful and making sure they were well nourished, clean, and ready to learn, all of which occurs in the home. Yet, as the father's quote demonstrates, to send your child to school and "let the teachers do their job" is seen as not being involved in the education of one's child. The father's expressed understanding that this lack of perceived involvement is a "Hispanic thing" and not the result of a school system that has failed to bridge the language gap and make expectations around parental involvement explicit to non-English speaking parents places all of the responsibility on the Mexican parents and none on the schools. Unfortunately, his rendering of the situation is often shared by the teachers and school personnel who directly work with Mexican-origin children (Olivos et al., 2011).

## **Implications for Practice**

What the individuals interviewed in this study convey is that Mexican parents care deeply about their children's education. While in Mexico, these families played active roles in the education of their children. Furthermore, Mexican parents have made the substantial sacrifice of leaving everything familiar to them in the hopes of accessing the economic and educational opportunities present in the U.S. Unfortunately, many frustrated teachers and administrators who have not been able to narrow the educational achievement gap have attempted to diminish their role in the situation by charging that Latino parents are not adequately involved in their children's education (Zentella, 2005).

As the children of Mexican-born parents continue to enter U.S. classrooms, it will become increasingly important that educators engage in dialogue with Mexican and Mexican American communities to better understand the different interpretations of what it is to be “well educated” as opposed to *bien educado*. If we consider that Latino students currently make up nearly one-quarter (23.9%) of the nation’s public school enrollment and this number is predicted to increase with time (Pew Research Center, 2012), it should be a prerequisite for U.S. teachers to have some understanding of Mexican culture, as well as the cultures of other Latin American countries, in order to bridge the cultural differences that often exist between Anglo teachers and Latino families (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

Furthermore, American educators need to recognize the obstacles that have been placed before Mexican parents when trying to become involved in the education of their children—the most paramount being the often tacit understanding that parental involvement requires English proficiency. Bridging the linguistic barrier would require a solid commitment on the part of the schools, but it is in no way insurmountable. This obstacle could be tackled by altering and adding a number of school practices. To begin, schools such as the ones described in this article need to hire more bilingual and preferably bicultural personnel and compensate them fairly for any additional bilingual services they provide. More schools could also provide ESL classes to their non-English speaking parents, as many currently do. By doing this, schools not only help parents to communicate with a primarily English-speaking staff, but they redefine the school as a community center that has valuable resources to offer its non-English-speaking parents. Considering that many Spanish-speaking parents would like to be more involved in their children’s schools, schools could help to facilitate the creation of Latino parental involvement projects in which Spanish-speaking parents had a multilingual space to share their ideas and concerns. Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis’ (2012) study on Latino parental involvement demonstrates how participants who were involved in such projects developed a sense of agency and an appreciation for the role that education played in their children’s lives. Schools could also help to organize their bilingual parents and staff to help non-English-speaking parents negotiate events like back-to-school night, school orientations, and parent–teacher meetings. Durand and Perez’s (2013) research on Latino families and school involvement underscores the need for Latino parents to support one another in creating “vibrant schools that educate and empower children, celebrate children’s cultural heritages, and serve as sites of change within communities” (p. 75).

Research on schools that have been able to successfully bridge cultural and linguistic barriers (Araujo, 2009; Durand & Perez, 2013; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; López, Scribner, & Mahitvanichcha, 2001; Panferov, 2010) repeatedly demonstrates the importance of having bilingual staff at the school site. In Durand and Perez's (2013) study of a dual language school, Latino parents viewed the bilingual atmosphere as being one of the most significant factors in creating an environment in which they felt welcomed and valued. Obviously, this would be challenging for schools that speak a multitude of languages, but nearly half of all immigrants in the U.S. are Spanish-speaking (Brown & Steplen, 2015), and 13% of North Carolina's total K–12 public school population is Hispanic (Pew Research Center, 2012). To argue that schools shouldn't offer bilingual spaces to Spanish-speaking parents—or any other widely spoken language group—because they don't have the staff to offer these same spaces to speakers of less widely spoken languages is to use a rigid application of equity as a justification for not providing services that could and should be offered. Over 80% of English language learners in North Carolina speak Spanish as their first language (Batalova & McHugh, 2010), which should warrant the provision of bilingual services and spaces for Spanish-speaking families.

In preparing our future teachers, schools of education should reexamine their foreign language requirements. Most universities require two years of a foreign language, but this often does not lead to proficiency in a second language. Research has demonstrated that teachers who have a working knowledge of a student's first language provide these students with better instruction (Dixon et al., 2012). Requiring proficiency in a second language for preservice teachers would help schools bridge the language barriers that exist for many of our immigrant parents. It would also help to promote a culture of multilingualism in which languages other than English were viewed as a resource and not a limitation (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). If schools are to truly meet the challenge of a global society, then they need to cultivate a teaching force that is prepared to work with a culturally and linguistically diverse population of students. This means that, ideally, teachers should have a basic proficiency in a language other than English.

Similar to the findings in other studies (see Araujo, 2009; Ramirez, 2003), the findings of this study clearly underscore the need for more dialogue between the families interviewed and the schools their children attended. Schools need to carefully and purposefully design practices that will ensure the inclusion of their non-English-speaking families. It is not enough to say, "Let them learn English," especially when research shows that it takes between seven to ten years to develop native-like speaker performance (Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Nor is it realistic to think that the demographic shift is

going to reverse itself. As educators work to meet the academic needs of a more diverse student body, they must also create policies and practices that ensure that all families can participate in their children's education.

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