Latino Parent Involvement: Examining Commitment and Empowerment in Schools

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Abstract

This study examines the process of parent engagement at three community and school-based parent participation projects involving Latino immigrant families in California. Through the participants' *testimonios*, the study investigates the motivations and interactions contextualizing their leadership development, participation, and organizing activities as well as the significance of their emerging school activism on other aspects of their lives. Specifically, the study explores the notions of *tequío* and women-led activism, seen as critical to understanding the participants' engagement process and to increase the level and quality of Latino parent participation in schools, maximizing its positive impact on their children's education and life prospects.

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This article examines three community and school-based parent and caregiver participation projects in California that involved Latino immigrant families. Through these efforts, we focused on an in-depth exploration of the process of participation and family engagement with urban schools. More specifically, we investigated the motivations fueling the school-based participation and organizing activities of parents from historically underserved communities and the significance of their organizing activities on other aspects of their lives. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (see Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010) offer a multilevel model of the parent involvement process that includes a special focus on the understanding of why parents become involved in their child's education. According to their model, the importance of investigating parent's motivations cannot be underestimated. They convincingly argue that parents' personal motivations, combined with school and cultural contexts, influence the degree and manner in which parents develop the efficacy to involve themselves and advocate for their children. Along similar lines, Lareau's (1989, 1994) work explored the socio-historical-cultural contexts that influence the oftentimes unequal relations between families and schools. She offers an important reminder that the contexts of race, class, and family life—including families' experience with historical legacies of school discrimination—should be at the center of our research on parent involvement.

Building on the work of these and other researchers, this article focuses on the collective journey of action and advocacy of Latino, working class urban parents in three separate programs. We found that many of these families shared similar motivations for why they became involved in their children's education and were unified by a common quest for a more effective and safe academic alternative for their children. Specifically, we have identified and examined significant layers of these families' individual and collective processes of participation by exploring the Latino parents' narratives and their activities within specific contexts. We found that notions of *tequio* (De La Fuente, 1989), or a collective dedication, as well as strong feelings of immigrant solidarity and a shared urgency to resist unequal schooling practices, figured prominently as forces behind their engagement of advocacy and activism. Combined, they provided a unique context to understand these parents' motivations and actions. We believe that a comprehensive examination of their specific modes of school participation, parental motivations—both in the aspirational and fungible realms—as well as other life-transforming implications of parental engagement in schooling, is critical to increasing the level and quality of such involvement. Ultimately, Latino parent involvement conceived within a context of increased equity, inclusion, and activism seem to hold the potential to maximize a positive impact on their children's education and life prospects.

Understanding Parent
Involvement and the School Context

The connection between increased parental involvement and improved school performance has been well established in the school reform literature (Epstein, 2009; Garcia & Jensen, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Lam, 1997; Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2004). The various approaches to parent and community participation in schools and the search for more equitable partnerships among them are generally seen as complex phenomena that are affected by a variety of factors involving issues of pedagogy, socioeconomic status, power, and ideology (Auerbach, 2007; Darder, 1991; Lareau, 1989, 1994). Although there are varied and even contrasting approaches to examining the issues involved, an increased level of parental participation is considered a key component of successful school reform by practitioners and researchers alike. This appears particularly relevant when there is a shared emphasis on its positive effects on the schooling of students from low-income families and communities of color (Darder, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005; Ramirez, 2010).

In a recent study, Ramirez (2010) identified six major areas of focus for comprehensive school improvement where changes are needed if education is to improve significantly for children of traditionally underserved communities. They are curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, roles and responsibilities, aligning school resources to support school improvement plans, and school–home–community collaboration. He argues that while much research and some positive results have been achieved in the first five components throughout the last four decades, the keys to a meaningful understanding of what is needed to create and sustain successful partnerships between schools, communities, and families has not been sufficiently examined nor improved in practice at a noticeable pace. Ramirez' last suggestion, the need to develop meaningful home–school collaborations, is timely and palpable when we consider that the understanding of key terms such as "parental involvement," "parent participation," and "family partnerships" have, over time, acquired somewhat conflicting meanings for the different stake holders in the school communities. In addition, the various interpretations of these concepts by teachers, administrators, and parents are often consistent with their particular social location, their institutional agendas, and their own visions of schooling (Auerbach, 2007; Lareau, 1994; Ordoñez-Jasis, 2010; Sil, 2007). Thus, given that teachers, administrators, and parents often see "parent participation" in a different light and within differing parameters, it is not uncommon to find teachers and administrators wondering about the reasons for the lack of parent involvement in a particular school. Conversely, many of those same parents may feel that their presence in the school is unwelcome and

Table 1. Parent Engagement Projects

La Familia Initiative	Charter School Parent Initiative	Project *Avanzando*
Parent organizing effort started by a small group of Latino immigrant mothers at a large middle school in Northern California	Latino parents who participated in the creation of a community-based charter school through a series of inclusive community meetings in Southern California	Community-based adult education program serving Latino migrant agricultural workers in Southern California
Ten parent interviews conducted, focus group interviews with 10 parents, 13 community meetings observed	Ten parent interviews conducted, focus group interview with 10 parents, 15 community meetings observed	Ten parent interviews conducted, focus group interview with 10 parents, eight project meetings observed

their suggestions and contributions often dismissed by school personnel (Lareau, 1989; Rodriguez-Brown, 2010; Valdés, 1996).

Recent studies have challenged prevailing views of parental participation in schools as a uniform, all-encompassing voice toward school improvement. Rather, the research suggests that the involvement of parents in the schooling of their children tends to replicate and legitimize the dominant voices of more prominent families with access to the kinds of resources and cultural capital valued by schools (Gay, 2000; Knight & Oesterreich, 2002; Sil, 2007). Moreover, significant data indicate that traditional institutions created to represent parent voices such as Parent–Teacher Associations and School Site Councils, often do not represent the diversity of families in the school community and that, without significant changes, they tend to perpetuate distorted assumptions about a lack of interest of working class parents and families of color in the education of their children (Auerbach, 2007; Epstein, 2009; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005; Nachshen, 2005; Sanders, 2009).

Method

Data Source

Three different parent involvement programs were examined, all located in low-income, inner-city contexts: two are school based while the other is a grassroots initiative with participation from a community-based nonprofit agency (see Table 1). The projects were analyzed in a manner responsive to

what Weiss (1998) calls "a capability for understanding dynamic developments in a program as it evolves" with a "special sensitivity to the influence of context" (p. 253). They were selected from a list of school or community-based programs with significant community support that also received some organizational or financial state funding. The criteria for program selection were based on four basic conditions. The program should (a) have a recognized track record of improved schooling for its intended participants; (b) have representative and stable grassroots governance, demonstrated through at least 2 years of intervention in the community and a committed, nonpaid group of parents and community volunteers in decision-making roles, and (c) mirror the characteristics of an "empowerment project" (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005; Jasis & Marriott, 2010). An *empowerment project* is a community effort with its independent mission and purpose, its self-defined participatory agendas, and its own inclusive governance structure or "grammar of democracy" (Lichterman, 1996). After project selections were made, all project participants and their families were informed of the study and were invited for interviews and observations. Out of a total of 85 families, 30 self-selected, diverse groups of parents and caregivers (10 parents per project) became core participants of this investigation. Their range of project participation, their roles, as well as their views of these efforts, were purposely diverse, which added complexity to our analysis, widening the "repertoire of legitimate responses" (Weiss, 1998, p. 134).

La familia initiative. First in our exploration was La Familia Initiative, a parent organizing effort started by a small group of Latino immigrant mothers at a large middle school in Northern California. The school had experienced a recent, significant increase in the number of Latino immigrant students, who in 2 years had jumped from single digits to a solid 26% of a student population of more than 900 students. In the words of the school principal "we were always trying to find new ways of engaging our new Latino families with mixed results, but the parents of La Familia Initiative gave us all the support the school needed to succeed" (S. Jones, Interview, April 2002). We followed the development of La Familia Initiative over a period of 2 years, recording more than 280 hr of interviews and meeting proceedings (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005).

In this project, and according to the participants' own project artifacts and testimonials, the parents' intent was to organize and mobilize families independently to establish an active partnership with the school with the goals of supporting student achievement through an improved dialogue with school personnel, enhancing student safety and participation, promoting cultural pride, and increasing family engagement at all levels of school life (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005). The project eventually attracted the participation of other schools in the region, promoting parent participation at a larger scale.

Charter school parent initiative. The second effort analyzed in this study was the process of parent participation in the creation of a community-based charter school through a series of inclusive community meetings. Through the process, the participants learned about the complexities of institutional engagement and jointly articulated an alternative view of schooling that affected the local educational landscape. The proposed charter school, which eventually opened with 240 students mainly from Latino immigrant families, was initiated by a group of 12 parents, aided by three local teachers and two former school district employees with organizational experience. As the school vision was articulated, more local families joined the efforts, tapping into an existing informal network of local activists and organizations that strengthened and legitimized the process in the eyes of the community. A total of 10 parents with a diversity of opinions and views of the school agreed to be interviewed for this section of the study out of 35 active participants.

Project Avanzando. Last, we examined Project *Avanzando*, a community-based adult education program serving migrant agricultural workers, and the impact this effort had in the participants' involvement with their children's schooling. This program had been active in the community for 6 years at the time of this study, and had an impressive record of graduating adult migrant workers, while providing tutoring support to their school-age children. Our goal was to observe and analyze the process of parental involvement among these traditionally marginalized sectors of the immigrant community as they became more engaged in their own educational advancement. Over 80 participants in regular attendance were informed of this investigation and invited for interviews, and many program activities were recorded and examined. A core, self-selected group of 10 parents was interviewed at different times for a period of 1 year with the goal of attaining through their testimonials and perceptions a "systematic understanding of complex interactions and insights into their processes of change" (Weiss, 1998, p. 269).

Data Analysis

Throughout this study, our focus was not on the most visible institutional levels of participation, such as school or agency-sponsored organizing activities, meetings with school administrators, or coalition-type efforts. Rather, our intention was to explore the various individual and collective processes the participants engaged in during their *journey of involvement* in the schooling of their children. Since it is generally accepted that the families that are less likely to participate in their children's schooling are of lower income, from communities of color, and often of immigrant backgrounds (Garcia & Jensen, 2009),

we wanted to analyze the motivations and the deeper meanings these emergent participant-activists assigned to their own participation and organizing activities, as well as the possible impact these processes could have in other areas of their lives.

To engage effectively in this effort, open-ended interviews were conducted with 30 Latino, primarily Spanish-speaking parents/caregivers from the three parent engagement projects. The interviews were conducted mostly in Spanish by Spanish-speaking interviewers of Mexican or Mexican American descent. Our data also included focus group interviews with many of the same parents at each project, observational notes from preparatory and community meetings, school-based activities, as well as other, less-structured community events, over a period of 2 years. Interviews were transcribed and fieldnotes were color-coded, patterned, and categorized according to salient themes that emerged from the participant narratives as well as from our own field notes for further analysis. When needed, the participant interviews were translated from Spanish, protecting the spirit and integrity of the testimonials by triangulating all translations with bilingual community activists as well with the informants themselves. As the study progressed, we elicited the input of the participants involved for accuracy, diversity of views, and definitions of significant categories of examination as well as to value their engagement and the "points of view of the people studied" (Weiss, 1998, p. 265).

Testimonios. Our ethnographic approach was informed by two parallel, yet distinct notions. The first approach, pioneered by Brunner (1994), views a person's narrative as a continuing "interpretation and re-interpretation of experience" where "life as *led* is inseparable from life as *told*" (p. 36). The second draws on Beverley's (2005) concept of *testimonios*, in which the participants' oral histories and daily experiences become the core material to examine a sociohistorical milieu. The *testimonios*' approach has rich historical roots in Mesoamerican traditions and is, in essence, a participant's recollection of their significant, multilayered personal accounts of life events and experiences in their own voices. In the context of this ethnographic stance, these testimonial narratives from parent activists can be seen as a sort of a contextual mosaic that allows for the validation of a diversity of traditionally disenfranchised voices, experiences and views of reality, which then take center stage in sociohistorical analysis. This methodological stance gives public relevance to complex narratives of the daily struggles, challenges, aspirations, and symbolic realms of working people who are often marginalized from official discourses. Mannheim (1985) provides an early, solid rationale behind these connections, to which we associate throughout this study:

Precisely because knowing is fundamentally collective knowing (the thought of the lone individual is only a special instance and a recent development), it presupposes a community of knowing which grows primarily out of community of experiencing a general sense of interdependence—of the interdependence which binds the single experience to the stream of experiences of single individuals, and these in turn to the fabric of the wider community of experience and activity. (pp. 31-32)

In the views of Bertaux and Kohli (1984), the examination of life histories in this manner has the power to encapsulate the complexities and contradictions of larger sociostructural relationships in which subjectivity, and therefore action play significant roles. Furthermore, we believe that by examining biographical narratives in this context we advance our understanding of the larger societal forces framing the school participation of historically underserved families and communities and their relationship to schooling: Issues of power, social justice, equity, racism, and resistance as well as their impact on communities and schools.

Organizing in Schools and Communities: Examining Three Experiences

At the three projects examined, the participants emphasized the importance of their community organizing activities as they affected their schooling and their lives, their increased motivation as their views and opinions became respected and validated, and their shared sense of purpose that unified and strengthened their collective actions. Each project and its participants, however, responded and adapted to its own conditions and contexts at the school or community where it operated, and each of them is individually examined in this section.

La Familia Initiative

Teresa Corral was an active participant at La Familia Initiative's *Junta Directiva*, or Steering Committee. An energetic, single mother of two students at a local middle school, she was born in the central highlands of Mexico and emigrated to a bustling Bay Area city almost 15 years ago. A hardworking seamstress at a large garment company, she also cleaned houses after her long daily shift, but, as she emphasized during our interview, she would not miss any weekly La Familia meetings since the project's inception. As

reported by an earlier study (see Jasis, 2000), the program was created by a group of five Latino immigrant mothers at the local middle school with the intention of organizing parents and working in partnership with the school to address the chronic academic underperformance of their children. At first resisted by some weary teachers, their dedicated efforts were eventually supported by the school principal and warmly embraced by the school community after several successful, well-attended parent engagement activities. After 6 months of organizing activities, a total of 115 parents were active participants at this project, encompassing almost all of the Latino parents at the school. La Familia parents organized their efforts through a participative structure that included a *Junta Directiva* (Steering Committee) and a number of *Comisiones* (committees) in charge of specific organizational needs such as the *Comisión de Organización* (Organizing Committee), *Comisión de Comunicaciones* (Communications Committee), *Comisión de Eventos Sociales y Culturales* (Social and Cultural Events' Committee), and so on. They also articulated their own "grammar of democracy" (Lichterman, 1996) through creative means of grassroots participation by rotating all elective La Familia leading positions as well as by promoting collective decision making and the development of voice and leadership among all participants, most of whom had not had prior community organizing experience.

As chronicled in previous studies conducted by Jasis (2000) and Jasis and Ordonez-Jasis (2005), these immigrant parents met and organized—as a functioning rule—independently of the school-sponsored structures. Rather, they met in environments where they could speak Spanish if they so desired, where they could bring and watch their younger children during deliberations, and where specific school personnel could join them only by invitation, and after the agenda, goals, and questions of the meeting had been previously discussed and agreed to by the parents. Based on past school-hosted meetings and having experienced the frustrating silencing of their individual and collective voices, parents' narratives revealed that they clearly recognized the power differential between themselves as immigrant families and the symbolic omnipresence of school personnel. Parents reported that many important school meetings had taken place with predetermined agendas and without any input from these parents, and without child care or translation. Thus, they intended to challenge the prevailing power gap by equalizing their interactions as much as possible, ensuring that they would have a fair chance to voice their views, asserting a symbolic validation of their voices and a more respectful consideration of their many suggestions for school improvement.

After 2 years of intense organizing activities, teachers, administrators, and diverse parents credited La Familia Initiative and its parent-activists with

dramatically improving the school climate and family participation levels, increasing the visibility of Latino students and their families, reducing inter-ethnic tension among students, and generally promoting academic success and cultural pride for the whole school community (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). Among the many activities these parents engaged in were teacher–parent dialogues, Family Math and Science Nights, parent-sponsored tutoring, Bilingual and Multicultural Council Meetings, Latino and multicultural holiday celebrations, community nutrition and food drives, Fitness Weekends, student safety walks, and family health fairs.

According to the parents' *testimonios*, the success of La Familia, however, rested on the individual commitment of each participant who sacrificed valuable family time, defied sleep deprivation, and at times cultural and gender-based expectations. For the participants, the lack of physical and mental rest after long working days at more than one low-paying job did not deter them from dedicating countless hours and much brainpower to the aims of the emerging parent group and its transformative school action. Their individual disposition also matched their attitude toward their collective endeavor, which allowed these parents to strengthen bonds of camaraderie that solidified their commitment while maximizing their transformative impact in the school community. One participant from La Familia Initiative described her experience in the following terms:

> We all work very hard here, but I know that since I began participating in the project, I am not the same anymore, I now ask questions, I stay informed, I relate to people in a different manner, not only in the school but also at home, and I feel that I have a lot in common with many other people. (T. Corral, La Familia participant)

The success of La Familia Initiative attracted attention from other area schools, some of which organized their own steering committees. These La Familia chapters organized a regional conference attended by more than 250 Latino immigrant parents. At the opening of the event, a leading parent organizer summarized their collective work and its joint moral quest with a simple sentence: "We are all working together for the future of our children."

Creating an Urban Charter School

Not long after La Familia participants celebrated the first inclusion of Latino children in the Honor roll at their Northern California middle school, a different group of equally committed parents started working diligently to create

a new public charter school in an economically depressed section of the Greater Los Angeles Area. Their goal was to establish a more effective and safer academic alternative to their much larger neighborhood school, which was seen by many families in the community as too impersonal, bureaucratically minded, and not responsive enough to the needs of immigrant families. Public charter schools, although diverse in structure and outcomes, are typically managed independently of their school district, often allowing for increased community participation from the school's inception through its daily functioning, promoting parent and teacher input regarding the school's mission, its academic orientation, and governance.

The parents involved at the planned charter school shared a similar socioeconomic and cultural profile with La Familia participants. The parents' narratives revealed that they also shared a past of frustrating interactions with local schools and school district personnel who, in the words of Angélica Sotelo, mother of a seventh-grade student, "always tell you that your son is doing just fine, and then you see his report card full of bad grades," or Mr. Zaldívar, who wonders how his daughter who was a stellar student in her native México became a "problem child" in her American school.

As they prepared to present a plan for their school, the parents organized themselves into smaller discussion groups to deliberate about the school's academic orientation, articulate the profiles they envisioned for the school principal and for the teachers to be hired, and became informed about administrative procedures in a participative governance structure. Maribel Matos, an active parent and prospective board member, shared her own feelings about these preparatory meetings:

> These meetings are helping the parents understand how schools function in this country; they put us in contact with people that are active in the community to tell us what services are available, how to communicate with principals and teachers and, finally, decide what kind of school we want for our children!

The process of school articulation was completed with a significant level of parent and community participation. Throughout all the trials and tribulations of the process, all participants engaged in profound and intense discussions about the role of schooling in society with a particular focus on the challenges faced by Latino families in Southern California. For the participants it was an affirming experience to have their views of the world deliberated on, and validated by, a forum of their peers and teachers. For example, Mr. Zaldívar shared this sentiment:

Here we learn together about the importance of each other's ideas. It does not mean that we always agree on everything, but what unifies us is that we all want the best for our children.

Project Avanzando

Similar feelings permeated the conversation of a group of mothers who had just concluded another hour of math instruction at Project *Avanzando*, a community-based adult education program serving migrant agricultural workers in Los Angeles' San Gabriel Valley. During one particular observation, more than 30 adult migrant workers were preparing intensely for their upcoming General Education Diploma (GED) exam. This certificate, the equivalent of a high school diploma, could eventually help them gain access to higher education or vocational training. As reported by Jasis and Marriott (2010), under this program, the instructional offering was supported by free child care, transportation from and to their workplaces and homes, and family or educational counseling. Each of the programmatic components had been articulated into a funded proposal written by a local nonprofit agency and based on priorities set by focus groups made of migrant parents and community activists in this inner-city setting. Their goal, in the words of Ms. Madrigal, mother of three and a Project *Avanzando* pioneer, was to,

Begin to think about ourselves, our future, and have a program totally different that what we had in school, with teachers we could talk to, a program we could be proud of, one that could also help our children do better in school.

Migrant agricultural families in California reside in rural and urban areas such as the location of this program, and typically share some of the lowest socioeconomic and educational indicators of any community in the Southwest (Murillo, 2005). Their situation worsened in recent years due to a generalized economic recession affecting the agricultural sector and the increasing use of irregular farm labor contractors by local ranchers, which further reduced wages and benefits (National Agricultural Worker Survey [NAWS], 2004). The educational status of these families mirrors their dire social positioning, with 89% of their K-12 students performing between "far below basic and basic" and a dropout rate exceeding 50% of registered students (Jasis & Marriott, 2010).

Data show that most migrant parents are not formally involved in the schooling of their children and often lack information to understand how the

school system operates, which support services can help their children's academic performance or what the teachers' expectations are toward parent participation and family engagement (Cranston-Gingras, 2003; Salinas, 2007). Their perceived alienation from school personnel was summarized by an adult *Avanzando* student in the following manner:

> Some of my children's teachers thought that they didn't have to dedicate much time to these children because they will always work in the fields, I don't agree with that!

However, for most of the *Avanzando* parents these negative dispositions would significantly change after months of participating in the program, and as they began to share with other migrant participants their journey toward learning and organizing in their children's schools. As a result of this process, many of them began to gradually reassert their protagonism in their children's schooling and reappreciate the role of education in their families' lives. Program data from an earlier study (see Jasis & Marriott, 2010) showed that immigrant families' interactions with schoolteachers and administrators became more assertive over time, and that their quest for increased knowledge of the educational system became an urgent, collective endeavor for most participants. The program evaluations also revealed a higher level of motivation toward their participation in their children's schooling, as these parents made progress toward their own educational goals (Arriaza, 2002; Murillo, 2005). Moreover, some of these participants felt increasingly empowered to suggest to their children's teachers what they considered to be more effective instructional approaches, based on their intensive GED preparation at the time and their more enthusiastic involvement in their children's homework. One parent remarked as follows:

> I can now sit down with the teacher and tell her how my daughter best learns math because we practice a lot at home.

Sylvia Ignacio, the program's counselor, believed that the participants' emerging involvement with schools was related to the many conversations they had about the importance of their engagement and advocacy for their children, and to their increasing sense of self-efficacy regarding their own education. She shared,

> We had many open conversations about the need to participate in their children's schools, but if you talk to them you realize that they really

took it to the next level, and as they now see the results nothing is going to stop them.

Latino Immigrant Families: School Engagement and Empowerment

As we examined these three parent engagement programs, we found a constellation of similarities and many shared, well-defined socioeconomic and cultural undercurrents permeating the motivational forces and efforts among Latino immigrant families. As we organized and coded the data that emerged from the interviews and community meetings, we identified various salient themes that address why these parents involved themselves in their children's education. Each is described and examined separately below and is as follows: Empowerment (individual and collective); immigrant solidarity, resistance and *confianza*; a sense of *tequío* that summarized their collective dedication; and women-led activism.

Empowerment

These initiatives, whether inspired by the parents themselves or by nonprofit agencies with community support, all transitioned toward experiences of individual and collective *empowerment*. This characterization often refers to processes that involve sociocultural, psychological and even ideological constructs that are local in nature and community-based, and involve "mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (The Cornell Empowerment Group, as cited in Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570). Typically, it also engages dispositions and behaviors involving a greater control over one's life, an increased sense of self-efficacy, as well as an orientation toward greater community participation and a stronger understanding of sociopolitical contexts and its implications for the life of individuals (Freire, 1993). Through a complementary approach, Robbins, Chatterjee, and Canda (1998) see empowerment as a "process by which individuals and groups gain power, access to resources and control over their own lives. In doing so, they gain the ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals" (p. 91).

Immigrant Solidarity, Resistance, and Confianza

Within this context, the participants in the three projects shared a parallel thread of motivation and commitment toward improving the educational and

general life prospects of their children. Coming from traditionally under-served and often educationally neglected communities, their transformative dispositions soon became a journey of action and advocacy for these parents, motivated by a common moral quest. Based on the parents' reflections, this moral disposition acquired a critical dimension when understood against a backdrop of increased hostility toward Latino immigrant families and communities at the local and national levels. This context is often characterized by anti-immigrant legislative attempts, daily harassment, and discrimination at work as well as a media discourse often bent on dehumanizing entire sectors of the population (Lopez & Minushkin, 2008; Noguera, 2006).

According to program participants, this climate of fear and intimidation also affected the friendly atmosphere of the parent projects explored through this investigation, when two migrant participants were detained and summarily deported as they were driving to their *Avanzando* GED classes. The incident affected families with many years of residence in the area, prompting a series of thoughtful deliberations among all participants about the daily struggles and the resistance of low-income Latinos in U.S. society, as well as on the need to strengthen, unify, and educate the community.

Throughout this process, the parents reported that they saw their education program as a unique, safe place for camaraderie and support, an environment where the participants could speak freely, in *confianza* (trust, comfort) and where to reconvene, strengthen their spirits, and articulate daily acts of resistance. Their disposition can be related to how Thich Nhat Hahn (as cited in hooks, 1990), describes a *community of resistance*, which is articulated "in opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system, (creating) places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness" (p. 43).

In this challenging context, however, the participants' visions of creating a stronger family and community through their collective educational efforts did not diminish. In fact, many of the parents' *testimonios* revealed that they saw the concerted attacks on Latino families as an opportunity to support, mobilize, and educate the community. For example, Ms. Durán, a long time La Familia organizer shared her views:

> This is the most important time to have the families well informed about their rights and supportive of the schools, it's not so much for us but for our children's future.

Her reflections mirrored the feelings of other participants interviewed as well as their committed disposition and emerging activism toward improved

schooling for their children. Through this process and against justifiably negative perceptions, these immigrant parents were able to articulate with their daily struggles an energized collective imagination, increasingly populated by hopeful visions of the community's future. Engagements of this nature exemplify what Rosaldo (1989) calls an effort capable of mobilizing "the moral imagination to move from the world as it actually is to a locally persuasive vision of how it ought to be" (p. 194).

A Sense of Tequío

The parents' organizing and educational meetings at the three projects were, indeed, long, intensely busy evenings spent collectively in deliberations, activities, and event-planning, adding many hours to the participants' already exhausting working days. The committed participation by the parents, as well as the emotional and social rewards it seemed to generate for all people involved, echoed the observations of Gold (1992), who calls such dispositions "localized social solidarity" (p. 229). The participants' own sense of commitment and their working toward the community's betterment was also examined quite effectively by Ms. Ramos, one of the mother-activists, who defined the process in her own terms:

> Our work with the schools reminds me of something we call *tequío* in my small town in Oaxaca (Southeastern Mexico), where everyone is supposed to dedicate time and work to the community's well-being without being paid, I think we are all here part of this *tequío*.

Interestingly, Ms. Ramos' unique contribution to the parents' reflections can be connected to a wealth of research about the concept of *tequío* in the literature. According to Mexican anthropologist Julio De La Fuente (1989), this type of *trabajo comunal* (or communal work) originated in the *faena* o *tequío*, a tradition dating from precolonial times. The *tequio* is honor-bound, unpaid communal work performed with the sole intent of improving the life and the future of the community and of future generations. In a number of rural communities in South Eastern Mexico where this practice is more prevalent, entire villages owe their very existence to the communal dedication of their inhabitants through *jornadas* of *tequio* (days of *tequio*). Projects such as health centers, schools, roads, flood prevention, health education and irrigation channels are often built by the community through the practice of *tequío*, where each community member is expected to contribute a predetermined number of work days to needed community projects (Quintero, 2007).

Practices of solidarity work among low-income Mexican communities have also been studied by anthropologists such as Madsen (1967) and Saldana Arellano (2009) who point to the values of cooperation among family members and members of the community as being long-recognized as critical elements of interaction and bonding among rural families, in contrast to the perceptions of more urbanized, middle-class families in México and in the United States, who tend to regard individual competitiveness as a more desirable quality. A significant number of rural Mexican families in both countries, including the migrant communities who moved to urban areas explored here, still depend on one another within and outside the home nucleus to raise enough food for the family's survival and thus, often regard individual competitiveness as a detrimental quality for themselves and their children.

De La Fuente (1989, p. 261) offers an expanded explanation of the importance of *tequío*:

It provides an opportunity for socialization and for the development of competencies. Generally, its implementation is surrounded by a sense of celebration, providing for an opportunity to renew encounters and social bonding, to exchange news about the community, and to be noticed socially, without promoting a person's social hierarchy or individual power in the community.

According to De La Fuente, the permanence of *tequío* practices in these communities throughout the centuries is a testimony to their desire for survival, belonging, and social progress.

Women-Led Activism

Another significant element of these parent empowerment projects revealed through the shared voices of the families, was the leading participation of mothers and grandmothers at all stages of deliberations and decision making. Their narratives revealed that the immigrant women-activists often defied entrenched gender and community perceptions to assert and develop their voices from the programs' inception and throughout their organizing activities. Their actions revealed a strong motivation to engage their school communities effectively through reflections and actions. As Ms. Corral explained,

At times one can feel isolated in this country, and by working together, with Susana, Patti, and Mrs. Montaño (other parent activists), one feels

more supported, without so much embarrassment, and one feels that is being heard and that we have good ideas to contribute.

These *testimonios* point to the value of camaraderie in these projects, a significant factor that helps these women-activists break a sense of isolation common to many low-income Latina immigrants (Kanter, Santiago-Rivera, Rusch, Busch, & West, 2010). Equally as important, the data also suggest a process of qualitative departure from a known sociocultural immigrant typology, referred by Chavez (1982, p. 186) as the "outsider within American society" by which they see their projects as grassroots, genuine efforts that offer a sense of belonging, support, and purpose.

Our observations and the participant interviews show that these organizing and school engagement activities also provided a valuable public speaking forum to these mothers and grandmothers, where their opinions, views of reality, and approaches to family communication and child rearing were not only respected and validated, but they often became policy suggestions at the schoolwide level. Their narratives suggest that these women-activists fashioned these grassroots projects into a locus where they could effectively find and develop their own public voices. Griselda Montaño, a grandmother-activist, exemplified the relevance of their emerging public voices through her own experiences,

> I remember very well when we complained about the lack of attention by the teachers to the children's science projects. This is something that I noticed at my home with my granddaughter several times because I saw her sad, so then I got motivated, shared it with the other moms and we told it to the principal, who asked the teachers to meet with us. That was the first time they really listened to what I had to say in the school!

The preponderance of women's involvement in their children's schooling has been examined in the literature (Lareau, 1994). Feminist writers often associate the involvement of mothers in their children's school activities and related "motherhood" rituals to social constructs instilled in girls since birth and through early gender socialization, typically linked to a sense of nurturing in the family. Luke (1996) calls these practices "visions of feminine destiny" (p. 173). She adds that, "put simply, mothering implies children, and children are reared primarily by women, whether in nuclear, single-parent, extended family, daycare or school contexts" (p. 173). However, our data suggest that the empowering engagement of many of the women activists

interviewed and observed in these projects involves a relevance of a higher level for these participants. Ms. Durán, a La Familia parent organizer reflected on the significance of her organizing work in the following terms:

> Working at La Familia helped me to be more sensitive to the needs of everyone, the students, the parents, and it made me reflect about my own experience as a mother and as a Mexican woman in this country, about the good things we bring with us, I learned about the importance of this work in the lives of all participants here.

The development of women's leadership at these projects has also raised awareness about the gap in participation in child rearing by fathers in some of the families. Although certainly not indicative of other household interactions, Mrs. Gutiérrez, a parent-activist, offered an insightful view of her intra-family dynamics regarding the different levels of participation between her spouse and herself:

> To be honest with you, my husband is not as active as I am when it comes to fighting for our children in schools. I am the one who would go to school and fight if we need to.

Mrs. Gutiérrez' feelings about her husband's underinvolvement seemed to fuel her determination to participate in organizing activities at their children's school. By contrast, our observations of the gendered dynamics of involvement in these activities indicated an actual increase in the degree of participation of many of the students' fathers and grandfathers, although generally at a lower level of leadership than demonstrated by the programs' mothers and grandmothers. For these women activists, the project seemed to offer a forum for camaraderie, solidarity, the development of an independent voice, as well as for what Barton and Walker (1983) call "the setting and the opportunity for resistance" (p. 14).

The daily workings of these parent engagement projects seem to have created the conditions for an emerging collective identity among the participating women, a process by which they gained strength from their sharing of experiences and their communal search for joint responses to the challenges facing their families and community. Indeed, the themes of solidarity, camaraderie, reflection, and action represented a clear undercurrent throughout the reflections of these women activists, mirroring the description of Porter (1996) regarding fraternal connections that frequently develop among working class women, which "typically are characterized by shared intimacies,

mutual support, and a concerned responsiveness to particular special rela-
tions" (p. 56). The empowering pattern of same-sex affiliation (Gottman, as
cited in Porter, 1996) developed among many of these women-activists and
was reflected in the strengthening of their school activism and advocacy,
which they learned to implement and promote at these organizing projects.
Our data suggest that through the emerging engagement with their children's
schooling, these Latina women are articulating a valuable educational contri-
bution that is often overlooked by researchers and practitioners alike. Their
particular commitment, which encapsulates their motivations, expectations,
sociocultural locations, political and historical development, affective invest-
ments, and dispositions can position them as effective organizers and leaders,
affecting the lives and the conscience of their families and their community.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, our goal was to examine the process of school
engagement of Latino immigrant parents and caregivers through their narra-
tives, expressed motivations, practices, and contexts. Our methodological
stance was aimed not only at giving their voices a central role in *our* analysis
of their engagement but also to include and validate *their* examination of
their own parental motivations, their processes, and their reflections toward
organizing and improving the schooling of their children. As a result, we
made the participants' process of empowerment, resistance, solidarity, and
tequío, as well as the leading role of women activism, the critical center of
our examination of these programs.

It was clear throughout these parents' process of school participation that
their engagement increased and became more meaningful within school con-
texts where their parental roles, their individual and family aspirations, and
life experiences and knowledge were respected and incorporated into the
school communities as valuable educational contributions. Through our
exploration, we also found that the participants' perceived their school
engagement in a variety of ways. Salient among them was that they viewed
the programs as able to mobilize their sense of belonging, purpose, and need
for community action as well as a means of challenging their cultural isola-
tion and promoting new avenues for localized participation and citizenship.
These factors should not be underestimated for they need to be understood
within the duality of consciousness that is often characteristic of immigrant
communities and individuals who, while longing for their original cultural
milieu, still struggle for participation and social mobility in American society.
This emerging sense of agency, which is often initially motivated out of

concern for their children's future and the family's well-being, over time, can expand into renewed, purposeful school and community-based activism as the participants realize the educational, emotional, and moral rewards associated with their organizing activities. Thus, individuals who would not necessarily advocate for themselves in other realms of civic participation or in the workplace can become active, motivated agents of empowerment and change when fighting to improve their children's education and their opportunities in life. An *Avanzando* parent aptly summarized this process when asked about her advocacy in schools: "I know I would do for my children what it would never dare to do for myself."

It would be difficult to identify the moment in which these parents' process of school engagement was initiated or under exactly what conditions these efforts became effective because they developed somewhat differently within each of the projects. However, at the heart of each of these efforts was a small, core group of concerned parents who, in contact with interested teachers, put aside their fears and understood the need to organize their peers informally, slowly gaining strength throughout the school community. In the case of Project *Avanzando*, the staff of a community-based nonprofit helped support and motivate the migrant parents' organizing efforts.

Throughout our examination of these projects, the parent activists reported an increased sense of individual and collective efficacy when interacting with school personnel, a factor of importance as schools and school districts learn to establish meaningful educational partnerships with diverse families and communities. In all three programs examined, the interactions became increasingly rewarding for students, parents, and teachers when all participants were able to establish a more inclusive, less hierarchical environment for dialogue. Through their *testimonios*, the parents showed great appreciation for the many instances when teachers and administrators genuinely deferred to their expertise and insights on their children's behavior or learning styles or on their ability to reach out to other families for increased school participation. At the individual level, the parents' organizing activities also had a profound transformative impact, creating significant conditions for leadership development and self-actualization, positively influencing dynamics at home and motivating a renewed appreciation for education and schooling as a locus of family empowerment. In sum, the experiences of these parent-organizing projects point to the potential for true school–family partnerships as well as for localized citizenship development, which can be initiated by parents, community organizers and educators alike within schools or in collaboration with schools. Our evidence suggests that the key throughout these projects was that they allowed all participants to express and then act on

their own motivations for participating. Their strengths, expectations, concerns, lived experience, knowledge of their children, ways of communicating and organizing, as well as their particular visions of schooling took center stage in schoolwide policies. It also suggests that formal and informal means of parent organizing, when supported by school communities and inspired by the wisdom and vitality of immigrant communities, can mobilize transformative local resources and become powerful tools of school reform and family and community engagement.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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