



## Elementary Principals' Social Construction of Parents of Color and Working Class Parents: Disrupting or Reproducing Conflicting and Deficit Orientations of Education Policy?

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**Abstract:** School principals, contending with competing characterizations of parents in education policy and society, may view parents in a number of ways. Two common understandings portray parents as authentic partners or, in contrast, simply supporters of the school's agenda. This paper explores these characterizations by considering the possible link between principals' understandings of parents and their approaches to parent engagement and/or shared decision making, especially in light of the ways that the social

context and education policy construct parents of color and working class parents as deficient. We use the lens of social construction of target populations to add to the currently minimal literature that directly examines principals' views of parents. We report findings of a multi-phase analysis of surveys of 667 elementary principals in the state of California and interviews with a subgroup of 34 of these principals. We explore how principals structured parent engagement and conceived of the goals and rationales for parent workshops, illustrating how they socially constructed the target population of parents, particularly parents of color and working class parents. We find that principals often constructed parents in terms of deficiencies and as needing to learn to better support school goals. Our findings have profound implications for advancing equity in schools.

**Keywords:** principals, parents, race, social class

### **La construcción social de los padres de color y de los padres de la clase trabajadora por parte de los directores de escuela: ¿Interrumpir o reproducir las orientaciones contradictorias y deficitarias de la política educativa?**

**Resumen:** Los directores de las escuelas, que compiten con caracterizaciones competitivas de los padres en las políticas educativas y la sociedad, pueden ver a los padres de varias maneras. Dos entendimientos comunes describen a los padres como socios auténticos o, en contraste, simplemente como partidarios de la agenda de la escuela. Este documento explora estas caracterizaciones al considerar el posible vínculo entre la comprensión de los padres y sus enfoques de participación de padres y / o decisiones compartidas, especialmente a la luz de las formas en que el contexto social y la política educativa construyen padres de color y padres de clase trabajadora como deficiente. Usamos el lente de la construcción social de las poblaciones objetivo para agregar a la literatura actualmente mínima que examina directamente las opiniones de los directores sobre los padres. Divulgamos los resultados de un análisis de múltiples fases de encuestas de 667 directores de escuelas primarias en el estado de California y entrevistas con un subgrupo de 34 de estos directores. Exploramos cómo los directores estructuraron la participación de los padres y concibieron las metas y fundamentos de los talleres para padres, ilustrando cómo construyeron socialmente la población objetivo de padres, en particular los padres de color y los padres de la clase trabajadora. Encontramos que los directores a menudo construyen a los padres en términos de deficiencias y que necesitan aprender a apoyar mejor las metas escolares. Nuestros hallazgos tienen profundas implicaciones para avanzar la equidad en las escuelas.

**Palabras clave:** directores, padres, raza, clase social

### **A construção social do pais negros e os pais da classe trabalhadora por diretores de escolas: Interromper ou jogar orientações políticas educacionais contraditórios e deficientes?**

**Resumo:** Diretores de escolas, corrida caracterizações competitivas de pais em política de educação e da sociedade pode ver os pais de várias maneiras. Dois entendimentos comuns descrevem os pais como parceiros autênticos ou, em contraste, simplesmente como defensores da agenda da escola. Este artigo explora essas caracterizações quando se considera a possível ligação entre os pais compreensivos e suas abordagens de envolvimento dos pais e / ou compartilhado, especialmente à luz das maneiras em que o contexto social e política educacional construir pais de opções de cores e pais da classe trabalhadora como deficientes. Usamos a lente da construção social de populações-alvo

para adicionar à literatura atualmente mínimo que examina diretamente as opiniões dos diretores sobre os pais. Nós divulgar os resultados de uma pesquisa multifásico análise de 667 diretores de escola primária no estado da Califórnia e entrevistas com um subconjunto de 34 desses diretores. Explore como gerentes de participação dos pais e objetivos concebido e fundamentos de oficinas para pais, ilustrando como o alvo pais, especialmente pais de cor e da classe trabalhadora população pais construído socialmente estruturado. Descobrimos que os diretores muitas vezes constroem os pais em termos de deficiências e precisam aprender para melhor apoiar os objetivos escolares. Nossas descobertas têm profundas implicações para o avanço da equidade nas escolas.

**Palavras-chave:** diretores, pais, raça, classe social

## Introduction

Research suggests that parents' leadership and involvement in school decision-making benefits schools and is linked to improved academic outcomes and progress toward equity (Ishimaru, 2013; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Welton & Freelon, 2018). However, education policy and practice frame parents in contradictory ways, as not only decision makers but also learners who lack certain knowledge and skills (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Rodela, 2013). School principals, left to contend with these competing characterizations, may work with parents as partners in shaping school practices and policy (Ishimaru, 2013) or, in contrast, constrain possibilities for parents to do more than support the school's agenda (Fernández & López, 2017). Though research has examined principals' interactions with parents and their views about parent engagement, very little scholarship has focused directly and predominantly on principals' social construction (Sampson, 2016; Schneider & Ingram, 1993) of parents. This topic is important to address considering the possible link between principals' understandings of parents and their approaches to parent engagement and/or shared decision-making, especially in light of education policy, which often construct parents—especially parents of color and working class parents—as deficient. If principals reproduce deficit social constructions of parents, schools will lose out on key actors who can help to advance equity.

Our study seeks to address this area through a multi-phase analysis of surveys of 667 elementary principals within the state of California and interviews with 34 of the survey respondents. We explore the ways principals create conditions that support parent participation in workshops and conceive of the goals and rationales for parent workshops, which illustrate how they socially construct the target population of parents (Sampson, 2016; Schneider & Ingram, 1993), particularly parents of color and working class parents. We address the following questions: (a) In what ways do principals create conditions for parent participation in workshops? (b) How do principals' goals and rationales for parent workshops illustrate their social construction of parent populations? We begin with a review of the pertinent literature and then move to an explanation of our conceptual framework, which centralizes the concept of social construction of target populations and is informed by scholarship on parents within education policy and practice (Auerbach, 2010, 2012; Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Rodela, 2013). We then describe the methods in depth before turning to our findings. We conclude with a discussion highlighting implications for policy and practice.

## Literature Review

In order to contextualize our study of principals' social constructions of parents, we draw upon a range of literature to explore policies and practices related to parent engagement and the potential and actual leadership, agency, and decision making of parents in education.

### Policy Approaches Parents in Conflicting Ways

United States education policy—encompassing federal, state, and local manifestations of policy and implementation—has approached parents' leadership and agency in conflicting ways. Some policies appear to support parents' leadership and collaboration in district or school decision-making. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), which was recently reauthorized with the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires schools to work together with parents. More recently, some state policies may also require schools to enlist parent participation, such as California's Local Control Funding Formula. This law, passed after our data collection, requires school districts to elicit parent input in budget decisions (Marsh & Hall, 2018).

However, education policy often underestimates parents—especially parents of color and working class parents—depicting them as needy. Deficit ideology based on genetics evolved into *cultural* deficit ideology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Valencia, 1997), leading to policies that have sought to compensate for students' supposed cultural deficits. Oftentimes the same policy advances competing characterizations of parents. For instance, though Title I and Head Start—which originated with the 1965 version of ESEA and target low-income families—call for parent input, they characterize some parents as lacking literacy and generally deficient in their ability to support their children in normative white, middle class ways (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Jiménez-Castellanos, 2012; Prins & Toso, 2008). Though Title I and Head Start policies do not specify racial groups, Stein (2004) demonstrates that Congressional debates preceding the passage of the ESEA focused not on academic achievement but on the supposedly deficient cultures of not only poor students but also students of color, specifically African American students. Deficit-oriented policies have prompted the creation of deficit-oriented practices. For instance, some states have adopted the Even Start Family Literacy Parent Education Profile, an instrument that classifies parents on a scale of 1 to 5 on the supportiveness of their parenting to their children's literacy outcomes. An analysis of this instrument shows that it evaluates parents according to a white, middle-class norm, thereby promoting deficit views of parents of color and working class parents (Prins & Toso, 2008).

### Schools Approach Parents in Conflicting Ways

Schools' approaches to parents and parent workshops may characterize parents in multiple ways, including as instruments for raising academic achievement and, at the same time, partners and possible contributors to school decision making. For instance, a popular practitioner book on parent engagement implies that school leaders and educators should consider parents in both of these ways (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). The authors of the book state, "The more the relationship between families and the school is a real partnership, the more student achievement increases. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains" (p. 3). The word "partnership" suggests two-way decision-making, and elsewhere the handbook provides guidance for schools about how to engage parents in decision making and advocacy. Likewise, documents discussing the Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) project of WestEd describe meetings to foster collaboration between parents and teachers, but also to encourage specific academic practices in the home (WestEd). Some case study research has provided examples of principals who seek to consider parents and community members as true

partners in decision making. Ishimaru (2013), for instance, illustrated how three principals, with support from a community organizing group, moved from traditional understandings of parents' roles in school to viewing them as potential co-decision makers. Similarly, some other research shows the equity benefits of diverse leadership teams, mutual school-community involvement, and principals' openness to viewing communities as resources (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Green, 2017; Khalifa, 2012). Indeed, existing scholarship reminds us that authentically engaging parents allows schools to benefit from the cultural background and home-based practices of families (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; De Gaetano, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Olivos, 2006). Meaningful inclusion of diverse parents in decision-making entails broadening and enriching the governance process. Innovative ideas and interests are introduced to the agenda and they are introduced through more plural forms of expression. Inclusive participation has the potential to stretch the understanding and ways of being of those involved in decision-making. The two approaches to parents—as partners in decision-making or supporters of academics at home—are not incompatible, but may involve competing understandings of parents. One views them as fellow leaders, whereas the other views them as enactors of the school's agenda (which may not reflect their input).

Shared decision-making positions parents in leadership roles as fellow shapers of the school agenda, including policies and practices; however, this approach appears to be rare (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017), especially with working class parents (Rogers, Freelon, & Terriquez, 2012) and/or parents of color (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Instead, as research on parent workshops and parent-school interactions indicates, parents' role in improving their own children's learning often takes precedence. Auerbach and Collier (2012) examined four elementary schools serving majorities of Latinx students that used a parent engagement program called Families Promoting Success. They found that the workshops were heavily influenced by accountability reforms related to No Child Left Behind and aimed to train parents in reading skills in order to boost test scores. Moreover, parents had little say in the format or content of the workshops. Similarly, Ishimaru and her colleagues (2016) show, in case studies of three parent and community engagement initiatives that included workshops, that family engagement workers and school leaders often imposed school goals onto parents, especially parents of color and working class parents. They explain:

Despite the language of “parent leadership” used by formal initiative leaders and an abundance of good intention, much cultural brokering work fostered individualistic, unidirectional, and unilateral dynamics that tended to socialize nondominant parents into dominant cultural norms and expectations in support of an agenda set without parents. (p. 865)

Other research has also found that schools offer narrow, constrained, and highly regulated roles of participation, particularly to marginalized parents, including parents of color and working class parents (Rogers et al., 2012).

### **Democratic Engagement of Parents**

There is a body of work establishing the value of well-functioning, deliberative school councils that authentically include parents in school decision-making (Anderson, 1998; Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). When parents participate on these councils, they have the potential to influence school-level improvement efforts and enhance their civic capacity to advance more equity focused agendas in schools and local communities. More inclusive participation structures at schools allow parents to become integral parts of a school's improvement strategy by contributing new and more representative ideas that shape key policies and practices in schools. Bryk et al. (2010) found

that strong school-family-community ties were one of five essential organizational elements that interact with teaching and learning in schools and ultimately lead to improvement in academic performance for students. They also found that a facilitative leadership style among principals was essential. Principals engaging a facilitative leadership style “cultivate a growing cadre of leaders (teachers, parents, and community members) who can help expand the reach of this work and share overall responsibility for improvement” (p. 25). In the context of their study, local school councils made up of parents, teachers, and community members aid in improved academic outcomes by helping to shape policy and school-based reforms.

Parents and community members becoming involved in school decision making allows them to envision greater ownership of their local school community so key stakeholders can work together to co-construct and support school goals. Schools may also represent a critical site for enhancing community-based civic participation, particularly for low income, immigrant parents, and parents of color (Rogers, Saunders, Terriquez, & Velez, 2008). Through this more capacity-building style of engagement, parents and school leaders can work with a broader coalition of constituents to infuse greater resources into local school communities. For example, Warren (2005) discusses how parent leaders in partnership with local community-based organizations can play an important role in advocating for school reform as well as broader community development issues that are linked to school reform agendas, such as affordable housing and neighborhood safety.

Shatkin & Gershberg (2007) argue that parent and community participation in school governing bodies can have a profound impact on community and neighborhood change. They observed how parents and community members participating in school governance spurred local activism related to school issues. This helped contribute to community-based social capital and improved school-community relations. The factors most important for fostering this kind of transformative renewal of schools and communities were, “the existence of a principal with a facilitative leadership style and the existence of civic capacity in the community at large” (p.601). Finally, there is evidence that participation on school site councils may lead many parents to run for other elected offices and participate more broadly in the work of civics-based community organizations (Altschuler & Corrales, 2012; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). This increased participation that connects schools to broader social issues has the potential to advance more equity-oriented outcomes. This may be especially important in under-resourced communities with high proportions of minoritized or working class families.

### **Principals’ Social Construction of Parents**

The scholarship on schools’ approaches to parent engagement suggests that that principals’ social constructions of parents necessarily influence the degree to which they foster parent participation in decision making (Ishimaru, 2013; Porrás Hein, 2003). However, little research directly examines this area. Some scholarship has illustrated *teachers’* deficit views of youth and their families, particularly those of color or those who are working class (Cooper, 2009; Lawson, 2003; Lightfoot, 2004; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Pollack, 2012; Redding, 1997). Other scholarship has shed light on this issue from the parent perspective, showing that parents of color face barriers in schools. For instance, Black fathers often encounter prejudice in schools (Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2015) and immigrant parents find little support in schools (Fernández, 2016). Of the scant research that directly examines principals’ perceptions of parents, Goldring’s (1986; 1990) is instructive. Her quantitative study of 113 principals in Chicago showed that parents’ assertiveness, responsiveness, homogeneity, and eagerness to participate were associated with principals’ perceptions of them (Goldring, 1986). Similarly, in a different study, she found principals’ interactions with parents varied along lines of social class in a study of 250 principals (Goldring,

1990). Flessa (2009) has also contributed scholarship in this area. He conducted a qualitative study of four middle school principals in an urban area, and the principals generally characterized certain parents of color as problems because their patterns of participation were different than other groups of parents. For instance, one of the four principals compared the small Asian American population at the school with the majority African American population, portraying the latter group in a negative light.

### **Parents of Color and Working Class Parents Engaged in Educational Equity Work**

In spite of schools' and principals' narrow conception of the role of parent engagement, parents—especially parents of color and working class parents—often take up broader issues that span beyond the needs of an individual school as they play central roles in challenging injustices in education. Parents of color and working class parents have been at the forefront of change efforts targeting systemic racism and resource inequities in schools, often assuming agentic leadership roles (Fernández, 2016; Freelon, manuscript submitted for publication; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). For example, parents have led campaigns to intervene in the school-to-prison pipeline, challenge school closures, address anti-immigrant policies, and more (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, 2016; Scribner & Fernández, 2017; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Parents have also generated policy recommendations and worked alongside principals, teachers, and students to further social justice aims (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Rodela & Bertrand, 2018). Welton and Freelon (2018) show how African American parents played key roles in challenging sweeping school closures in Chicago, which mainly targeted schools serving Black students. Rodela (2016) illustrates how a group of Latina immigrant mothers exercised their agency in ways that often were “undocumented” by schools but furthered the aim of equity for Latinx children. This parent agency can be considered a relational phenomenon unfolding within networks of activity, according to a framework advanced by a group of scholars (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Research has illustrated this understanding, showing how parent and community groups have advocated for educational change. Some parent groups that have enjoyed higher profiles in the literature include the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009), Padres y Jóvenes Unidos (Warren & Mapp, 2011), and Parent U-Turn (Johnson, 2011; Rogers, 2006).

Though the research illustrates the potential of parents of color and working class parents to advance equity in education, a narrow and deficit social construction of these parents is evident in education policy. Principals can disrupt or reproduce this construction, with profound implications for possibilities for schools to work together with parents to advance equity. With this in mind, this article aims to explore whether principals create supportive conditions for parent participation in workshops and socially construct them in discussions of the goals and rationales for parent workshops. Discussions of workshops provide a particularly appropriate entrée into understanding principals' constructions of parents. Workshops—encompassing a broad range of events and meetings with groups of parents—are one of a set of common sites of interaction between parents and schools. Parent-teacher conferences and principals' one-on-one meetings with parents are among this set; however, these meetings usually focus on the achievement and well-being of the parents' own children. Hence, studying principals' constructions of parents in their discussions of one-on-one meetings or parent-teacher conferences would skew results toward views of parents as home supporters of academics rather than players in school-level decision-making. Discussions of workshops, on the other hand, leave open possibilities for principals to advance a range of constructions of parents, including understandings of them as contributors to decision-making and/or supporters of the school's agenda.

## Conceptual Framework

In this study of how principals create conditions to foster parent participation in workshops and conceptualize the role of parents in their discussions of parent workshops, we draw upon the theory of social construction and policy design (Ingram, Schneider, & DeLeon, 2007; Pierce et al., 2014; Sampson, 2016; Schneider & Ingram, 1993), proposed by Schneider and Ingram. We understand this theory through the lens of scholarship on parents within education policy and practice (Auerbach, 2010, 2012; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Rodela, 2013).

The theory of social construction and policy design considers not only the text of a policy but also the social contexts, practices, and consequences of policy implementation (Ingram et al., 2007; Pierce et al., 2014). The theory posits that policymakers socially construct what is considered to be a problem, and often target a specific group of people with policy in order to allocate benefits or burdens (Sampson, 2016; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Policymakers may characterize these groups, called target populations, positively or negatively, thereby perpetuating social constructions. As Ingram et al. (2007) explain, the concept of target populations demonstrates why public policy “fails in its nominal purposes, fails to solve important public problems, perpetuates injustice, fails to support democratic institutions, and produces unequal citizenship” (p. 93). According to the theory, policy design—including the allocation of benefits and burdens and the definition of social problems—influences both institutions and cultures, on one hand, and target populations on the other. In turn, democracy and future policy design are influenced. In this way, policy entails and influences the construction of target populations.

The allocation of benefits and burdens depends on the relative power of a given target population and the degree to which the group has been constructed positively or negatively (as deserving or undeserving) (Ingram et al., 2007; Pierce et al., 2014; Sampson, 2016; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Ingram et al. (2007) and Schneider & Ingram (1993) bring these two elements together graphically in the form of an X-Y axis, with power on the vertical axis and the positive or negative characterization on the horizontal axis. Social constructions are important because they shape the experiences of target populations, potentially constraining their political participation (Ingram et al., 2007; Pierce et al., 2014). For instance, Sampson (2016), illustrates that school boards in the U.S. Mountain West often socially construct English learners as dependents, which has implications for policy outcomes. In this article, we draw upon the overarching concept of social construction of target populations rather than the X-Y axis.

As described in the literature review, policy and practice have often characterized parents as a needy or problematic target population. Indeed, Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez (2013) identify four such tropes about nondominant parents, including parents of color and working class parents. These tropes, which can be considered social constructions, “construct particular roles that also correspond to a set of educational approaches that advance a tone of deficit, urgency, and remedy when they involve parents of nondominant students” (p. 152). Two of these tropes are particularly salient for our study. The “parents as learners” trope relates to family literacy programs and is often driven by “deficit assumptions about nondominant families and their cultural practices” (p. 154). The other trope characterizes parents as those who should support the school’s agenda, but couches this in the language of “partnership.” The “parents as partners” trope is related to the School-Family Compacts mandated by Title I (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), a provision retained in ESEA’s reauthorization in 2015 by the Every Student Succeeds Act. Though the law calls for shared responsibility between the school and parents, it nevertheless “constructs a lack of parent involvement as endemic and as something that schools must address to get parents on board with their agenda, particularly on reform efforts” (p. 154). Thus the “partnership” envisioned by the law



does not entail shared decision-making about the school's agenda and policy and, instead, "relegates parent responsibility to monitoring attendance, homework completion, and TV watching..." (p. 155).

Other scholars have also noted that parent support for the school's agenda is often termed a "partnership," belying a mismatch of surface-level and implied meanings for the term (Auerbach, 2010, 2012; Rodela, 2013; Warren, 2011). Rodela (2013) explains that the term "partnership" is often applied to conventional parent involvement models, entailing activities involving support for school objectives, such as "back to school nights, parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at schools or field trips, fundraising for schools, communication with a teacher, etc." (p. 10). Similarly, Auerbach (2010, 2012) has proposed a continuum of school leadership for parent partnerships, ranging from preventing partnerships to engaging in authentic, two-way partnerships involving shared decision making. Between these two extremes lie approaches to parent engagement that are called partnerships but mean parent support for school goals. What Auerbach (2010, 2012) terms "leadership for nominal partnerships" is driven by policy mandates for parent and community involvement and involves hierarchical and unilateral decision making, with parents viewed through a deficit lens. In Auerbach's research, principals with this approach "welcomed partnerships in a nominal sense in service to the school's agenda" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 738). Moreover, communication was one-way, "with educators positioned as the givers of knowledge and with parents as objects receiving information..." (Auerbach, 2010, p. 738). Auerbach (2010, 2012) also proposes the category of "leadership for traditional partnerships," which includes elements of the leadership for both nominal and authentic partnerships. It involves limited two-way communication, constrained sharing of power, and academic training for parents, viewed as instrumental for student achievement (Auerbach, 2012, p. 43).

Viewing the theory of social construction and policy design through the lens of scholarship on parents, policy, and practice suggests that the explicitly stated target population of "parents" often refers implicitly to parents of color and/or working class parents in particular. This understanding illustrates how target populations may intersect (such as "parents" with "immigrants") or may be characterized in neutral or misleading language in policy yet nevertheless target specific racial, ethnic, or social class populations. Synthesizing the theoretical and empirical scholarship, we consider two common social constructions of parents of color and/or working class parents: (a) parents as learners and (b) parents as potential supporters of the school's agenda, which is often couched in the language of partnership. The former belies an assumption of a deficit of knowledge and literacy, defined narrowly. The latter overlooks parents' potential as valuable collaborators in improving schools and advancing equity, instead reifying hierarchical relationships. Schools, including principals, play a role directly and indirectly in these social constructions because policy design influences institutions, which, in turn, influence policy. Principals may be not only mouthpieces of policy but also active co-constructors of the target population of parents, specifically parents of color and/or working class parents. For this reason, research on principals' social construction of parents is important in order to understand the development and enactment of policy targeting parents. In addition, if parents are constructed as deficient, schools constrain the potential of parents to advance social justice-oriented change in schools. We address this area with our research, which is described in the next section.

## **Methods and Participants**

For this article, we analyze qualitative and quantitative data collected in 2011 from principals in the state of California. We surveyed and interviewed elementary and secondary principals to gain

an understanding of the then-present economic crisis and its impact on principals and schools. During this process, insights emerged about parents and parent workshops, leading to the focus on this article. We seek to address the following research questions: (a) In what ways do principals create conditions for parent participation in workshops? (b) How do principals' goals and rationales for parent workshops illustrate their social construction of parent populations? Our analysis uses elements of a convergent parallel design, in which researchers collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data separately and then compare results (Creswell, 2014). We modified this approach by comparing our analyses of both the qualitative and quantitative data in iterative waves, each of which informed the next. Below we provide a description of our survey and interview sample and describe our qualitative and quantitative methods separately.

The elementary school survey was initiated in Summer 2011. We used the electronic version of the 2011 California Public School Directory to collect the email addresses of all public elementary school principals in the state. Using the Qualtrics online survey tool, we emailed a unique survey link to the full census of elementary schools in the state of California ( $N=5,306$ ). We offered no incentive for principals to participate. However, throughout July, August, and early September after an initial wave of principals had responded, we sent second and third email reminders to principals who had not yet completed the survey. We placed special emphasis on principals serving different populations of students based on geography (regions of the state), percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, and percentage of underrepresented students. We placed recruitment and reminder phone calls to these targeted non-responders to ensure that we collected a representative sample across these categories of schools. In total, 667 principals, representing 12.6% of all public elementary school principals in California, completed the survey by September 2011. While this response rate is lower than an ideal for an online survey and might raise questions about non-response bias in the sample, Table 1 provides some data on the characteristics of the survey respondents and how they mirror the universe of elementary schools in 2011.

For the present analysis, we focus solely on data collected from elementary principals, who were asked specific questions about parents and parent workshops. As stated above, we received completed surveys from 667 elementary principals, of which the majority identified as female. (See Table 1.) Over 51% of principals surveyed reported their racial and ethnic background as white, with just under 4% identifying as African American and 12.4% identifying as Latinx. We interviewed 34 of the 667 principals, most of whom identified as female (61.8%) and white (85.3%), with nearly 12% identifying as Latinx (11.8%).

Table 1  
Principal and School Characteristics

	California Elementary Schools	Survey Respondents ( <i>n</i> =667)	Interview Respondents ( <i>n</i> =34)
<b>Principal Characteristics<sup>1</sup></b>			
<b>Principal gender</b>			
Female		53.8%	61.8%
Male		19.8%	38.2%
Decline to state		26.4%	0.0%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
African American		3.9%	0%
Asian		2.2%	2.9%
Latinx		12.4%	11.8%
Native American		0.6%	0%
White		51.4%	85.3%
Other/Decline to state		26.7%	0%
<b>School Characteristics</b>			
<b>School Enrollment</b>			
Average	563	546	553
Standard deviation	220	205	243
<b>% Underrepresented Students<sup>2</sup></b>			
0-49%	42.8%	43.5%	35.3%
50-89%	36.4%	37.8%	52.9%
90-100%	19.8%	16.0%	11.8%
Missing	1.0%	2.7%	0%
<b>% Emergent Bilingual Students<sup>3</sup></b>			
Less than 15%	30.1%	29.7%	22.6%
15-29%	22.5%	22.9%	12.9%
Greater than 30%	47.5%	47.4%	64.5%
<b>% Free/Reduced Meals<sup>4</sup></b>			
Less than 33%	33.3%	33.4%	20.6%
33-66%	33.3%	33.6%	26.5%
67% or more	33.3%	33.0%	52.9%

<sup>1</sup> The state of California does not report race and gender data for school principals. The state provides data on a much broader category of administrators, which includes school principals. We chose not to report this broader administrator category as it would be an imprecise comparison with our survey results.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term “underrepresented students” to refer to African American, Latinx, and Native American students, who are considered underrepresented in California’s higher education system relative to their population share in the state. Scholars with the Civil Rights Project (Orfield & Lee, 2006) have historically analyzed the distribution of schools by concentrations of minoritized populations as a way of understanding how different patterns of segregation impact students’ educational opportunities. We base our categories of segregated schools on this body of work.

<sup>3</sup> We prefer the term “emergent bilinguals” to the state designation of “English language learners” to highlight the assets of students. We use the category of 30% or more English language learners in an elementary school as a marker for schools that may exhibit higher patterns of linguistic isolation.

<sup>4</sup> We use terciles of students who are eligible for free or reduced meals to analyze school segregation patterns by socioeconomic level.

While the characteristics of the principals are relatively homogenous, with many of them identifying as white and female, the schools the principals in our study served were quite diverse. The average enrollment hovered around 550 students, which was very similar to the state average of 543. The majority of principal survey participants served schools where more than half of the students enrolled identified as Latinx, African American, or Native American. Additionally, almost half (47.4%) of principal survey respondents served schools with a high proportion of emergent bilingual students. However, the interview sample has 64.5% of our principals leading schools with greater than 30% of students learning English. Finally, our interview sample has over 52% of principals who served schools in the highest tercile of students receiving free or reduced pricing for meals. Overall, the surveyed principals served schools with characteristics similar to the pool of elementary schools in the state of California.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

To answer the first research question, about the ways principals create conditions for parent participation in workshops, we focus on three survey items about conditions that remove barriers for parent engagement. In particular, we review principal responses about whether they offer child care and translation services at parent meetings, as we know these two factors can hinder the involvement of many parents. We also review whether the principal has a parent or community liaison on staff. Having such a staff member could speak to the capacity of the school to facilitate deeper engagement among parents. We analyzed these survey responses for the entire survey pool and we also examined differences across school characteristics using chi-square tests for independence.

In addition to reviewing these more structural conditions for parent engagement, we also focus on set of questions where principals were asked about parent workshops. The first workshop question in the set asked principals if they offered parent workshops to families in their school and, if so, what specific topics were the subject of the workshops. Principals were given five close-ended responses: (a) ideas and strategies for parents to support their children at home, (b) expectations the school holds for parents, (c) information about instructional strategies or school programs, (d) information about how parents can participate in school decision-making, and (e) information and guidance about how parents can shape district and state education policy. We created an indicator variable for each of the five categories to understand the prevalence of different workshop topics among the principals.

While the survey allowed principals to mark more than one reply, we analyzed the data for each response independent of the five topics offered to parents in the survey. We then produced crosstabs and chi-square tests for independence to determine if there were differences across categories of schools, such as the concentration of students qualifying for free or reduced meals (our proxy for concentration of poverty), the percentage of students who are emergent bilinguals, and the percentage of underrepresented students. Through a process that considered the conceptual framing of the study as well as responses from some of the interviews with principals, we were able to view the workshops as a primary tool for understanding how principals may construct “parents as learners” in service of becoming “nominal partners.” However, two options from the survey offered the opportunity for us to understand how principals might frame some parents as contributors to equitable school change through shared decision making and advocacy for state and local education policy.

In the quantitative data, we consider items related to the topics of workshops based upon the assumption that indication of a topic of a workshop may suggest a goal. For instance, the topic of parenting suggests that a goal of the workshop is to teach parenting strategies and for parents to

learn the content of the workshop. However, the indication of a topic may not necessarily or always correspond to a goal in this way. For instance, a principal may feel compelled by the school district to hold a particular workshop; hence, the principal her- or himself may hold other or multiple goals for a workshop that may not be reflected by its topic. Nevertheless, as indicated by the interview data, principals often connected the workshop topic to the goal of the workshop, which suggests that the same trend might hold for the quantitative data.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

For the analysis of the interviews with 34 of the larger survey sample of principals, we focused on questions related to perceived barriers to academic success, emergent bilingual students, low-income students, and “struggling” students, which sometimes led principals to discuss parents and families. Also, if principals indicated on the survey that their school offered “workshops and trainings for parents,” they were asked a series of interview questions: (a) How does your school encourage parents to participate in these workshops or trainings? (b) What are the goals of these workshops or trainings? (c) Why does it matter that parents develop this understanding, knowledge, or skills? (d) How do the workshops or trainings seek to develop this understanding, knowledge, or skills? These questions resulted in rich data, as principals analyzed their motivations and rationales for the parent workshops at their schools.

As we approached the analysis, we considered the very nature of the terminology of “workshops and trainings for parents” in the interview protocol (which mirrored the language of the survey). The terminology of “workshops and trainings” suggests that parents need to learn something, especially the term “trainings.” The term “workshops” could have been interpreted more broadly by the principals, but many may have assumed an instructor-learner dichotomy. Hence, the wording of the interview questions may have shaped the responses. However, the qualitative data set presents an opportunity, in that each principal was asked the questions in an identical manner. This created opportunities in the analysis phase to compare how principals responded in a broad range of ways, given identical prompts. In addition, when principals discussed parents in response to questions that were not about parents, we gained a perhaps less filtered understanding of principals’ views. Thus, the interviews provide an opportunity to understand what principals think about parents when not directly asked about them, thereby potentially providing a more nuanced sense of their underlying beliefs. Another consideration of our analysis was how a perceived parent need or deficiency was conveyed. In some instances, principals conveyed cultural deficit ideology, defined as beliefs that the so-called achievement gap in school outcomes is rooted in the supposedly deficient culture of some groups of students of color, such as African American and Latinx students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). In other instances, though, principals discussed seemingly objective areas of need, such as a lack of formal education. Simply stating the topic of a workshop also illuminated an underlying assumption about parent needs on the part of policy at least (but not necessarily of the principal).

We analyzed each interview in its entirety rather than focusing on responses to particular questions. We began by importing all 34 interview transcripts into NVivo 11 and conducting initial coding (Saldaña, 2009), an approach that is inspired by Charmaz’s (2006) approach to grounded theory that entails being open to patterns and themes that arise. We were informed—but not constrained—by the research questions during this first phase of analysis. During this phase, we created 32 codes, including both parent and child codes. One of the parent codes, “viewpoints related to parent engagement,” was the umbrella over many child codes and indicated principals discussing “home-school connection,” “parents as partners,” or “parenting skills,” for example. Also, we noted when principals used a cultural deficit lens (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997) to discuss

parents or indicated that parents do or should support “school-based instructional goals” at home. We also included codes to indicate when principals discussed race, immigration, or parents speaking a language other than English.

After our first phase of analysis, we created a series of matrices to better understand patterns across the 34 principals (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). In our first matrix, we copied and pasted quotations showing each principal’s explicitly and implicitly stated goals or rationales for workshops. In addition, we added information about the principals’ schools and themselves, along with noting whether specific parent groups were targeted for workshops and whether deficit discourse was present. Analysis of the resulting matrix, in addition to the application of our conceptual framework, led us to create 12 new codes, including: (a) deficient parenting/home atmosphere/nutrition; (b) English proficiency or lack thereof; (c) lack of sensibility that parent involvement in children’s education is important; (d) lack of literacy, vocabulary, or formal education; (e) lack of sensibility that education is important; (f) how to support education in general; (g) how to help children with academics; (h) how to do “the basics” to support children academically (such as setting up a homework routine); and (i) how to navigate schooling and school terminology. We applied these codes within a second matrix, which allowed us to sort by these items and also by school and principal characteristics. We created a final matrix to bring together all salient aspects of the previous matrices.

The qualitative analysis, then, was an iterative process, in which each phase built upon the previous one. Also, at key points in the process, we compared our qualitative and quantitative analyses in ways that each informed the other. Overall, the analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data allowed us to address our research questions.

## Findings

Our analysis shed light on how principals provide structural support for parent engagement and their social constructions of parents as illustrated by discussions of goals and rationales for parent workshops. In the following sections, we explore these areas, with each section corresponding to one of the two research questions. We use the quantitative data to respond to the first question and the qualitative data to respond to the second question.

### Creating Conditions for Parent Participation in Workshops

Principals can have a goal of increasing parent participation in the school’s many efforts, but unless there are structures in place to support parents’ participation, it can be a challenge. Table 2 shows the percentage of principals surveyed and the types of supports they offer to facilitate parent engagement in their schools. Nearly 92% of principals surveyed offered translation services at meetings. Only 66% offered child care at parent meetings, while 46% of principals surveyed noted that they have a parent coordinator or community liaison on staff at their school.

When we examine these same survey items across school characteristics we see some important differences. (See Tables 3-5.) For example, principals in schools serving higher percentages of students from racially and ethnically diverse schools are more likely to provide translation services for parents at meetings. This result is expected as these schools are more likely to have higher populations of emergent bilingual students or students whose parents might be recent immigrants. Overall, these percentages were around 82% for schools serving students with more homogeneous student populations, suggesting that many principals in California provide these services at parent meetings. This finding is encouraging and speaks to an effort for schools to be open to serving a diverse set of families in their schools.

Table 2  
*Percentage of Principals Offering Structural Supports for Parent Engagement*

<b>Structural Supports</b>	<b>% of Principals (N=667)</b>
Translation services provided for parents	91.9%
Child care during parent meetings	66.1%
School has family coordinator or community liaison	46.1%

Principals from schools in the mid-level poverty range and schools with 50-89% students of color enrolled were more likely (74.1%) to offer child care at meetings than the two other school communities. The only time this pattern did not hold was when examining this indicator across percentage of emergent bilingual populations at the elementary school. Schools serving families where more than 30% of students are learning English reported 72% of principals offered child care services at meetings. Structural support for child care during meetings might be an important consideration for parents who have to make difficult choices about whether to attend a school meeting given competing parenting demands.

Based on our survey responses, it appears somewhat rare for elementary schools to have a staff position dedicated to supporting families and engaging the community near their school. As we mentioned, fewer than half (46%) of principals surveyed have this position. However, the patterns from Tables 3-5 show that principals of schools serving higher proportions of low-income students, underrepresented students, and emergent bilingual populations are more likely to have this position on staff. As with the other indicators of structural support for parent engagement in these schools, it is encouraging that the schools serving the most diverse populations of students and families recognize the need to provide greater support in these domains. Next, we turn to data examining the various topics covered in parent workshops.

Table 3  
*Crosstabulation of Percentage Underrepresented Students and Structural Supports for Parent Engagement*

	Low %	Mid %	High %	$\chi^2$
Translation services provided for parents	82.1%	98.2%	97.5%	32.2, 2DF $p < .0001$
Child care during parent meetings	55.8%	74.1%	68.5%	12.4, 2DF $p = .0020$
School has family coordinator or community liaison	32.9%	50.6%	62%	20.3, 2DF $p < .0001$

Table 4  
*Crosstabulation of Percentage Free/Reduced Meals and Structural Supports for Parent Engagement*

	Low Poverty	Mid Poverty	High Poverty	$\chi^2$
Translation services provided for parents	82.5%	95.4%	97.4%	12.45, 2DF $p = .0020$
Child care during parent meetings	50.9%	74.1%	70.8%	17.2, 2DF $p = .0002$
School has family coordinator or community liaison	28.5%	46.9%	57.8%	23.1, 2DF $p < .0001$

Table 5  
*Crosstabulation of Percentage Emergent Bilingual Students and Structural Supports for Parent Engagement*

	Low %	Mid %	High %	$\chi^2$
Translation services provided for parents	81.7%	92.9%	97.7%	25.1, 2DF $p < .0001$
Child care during parent meetings	56.8%	63.5%	72.2%	7.5, 2DF $p = .0235$
School has family coordinator or community liaison	29.5%	35.7%	56.5%	23.6, 2DF $p < .0001$

In terms of the reviewing the quantitative data on workshop topics offered by principals in our sample, we found an overall emphasis on parents advancing the school’s agenda. (See Table 6.) Of the overall survey sample, 490 answered the question about workshops, with 81.2% of these principals indicating that they offered workshops throughout the school year. Of the 490 principals, more than 94% reported hosting workshops about how parents can help their children at home. In comparison, 67% indicated that workshops focused on participation in decision-making and only 29% of principals reported hosting workshops on how parents can become involved in local and state-level policy reforms. These data suggest that some principals focused more on the construction of “parents as learners,” while deemphasizing opportunities to cooperatively engage issues of educational equity alongside parents.

Table 6  
*Percentage of Principals Hosting Parent Workshops by Topic*

<b>Workshop Topics</b>	<b>% of Principals (N=490)</b>
Parents supporting child at home	94.7%
Expectations schools hold for parents	68.4%
Info on school instructional strategies	76.4%
Parents participating in decision making	67.4%
Parents shaping state and local education policy	29.4%

Our quantitative data suggest differences in how parents were socially constructed as related to their race, social class, and/or language background. To examine these differences, we analyzed survey responses about workshop topics by school type. We used the chi-square test of independence to compare the frequency of workshop topics by percentages of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals in schools; emergent bilingual students; and African American, Latinx, and Native American students (underrepresented students). Tables 7, 8 and 9 reveal the results of this exploration.



Table 7

*Crosstabulation of Percentage Free/Reduced Meals and Workshop Topic*

<b>Workshop Topics</b>	Low Poverty	Mid-level poverty	High poverty	$\chi^2$
Parents supporting child at home	88.8%	96.2%	99.4%	16.8, 2DF $p=.0002$
Expectations schools hold for parents	51.7%	73.5%	75.3%	19.7, 2DF $p<.0001$
Info on school instructional strategies	70.7%	74.2%	81.8%	4.9, 2DF $p=.0868$
Parents participating in decision making	46.6%	74.2%	77.9%	33.6, 2DF $p<.0001$
Parents shaping state and local education policy	25.9%	30.3%	32.5%	1.4, 2DF $p=.4971$

Table 8

*Crosstabulation of Percentage Emergent Bilingual Students*

<b>Workshop Topics</b>	Low %	Mid %	High %	$\chi^2$
Parents supporting child at home	88.4%	95.3%	98.2%	13.7, 2DF $p=.0010$
Expectations schools hold for parents	53.7%	60%	76.5%	18.5, 2DF $p<.0001$
Info on school instructional strategies	69.5%	77.7%	78.8%	3.3, 2DF $p=.1933$
Parents participating in decision making	50.5%	60%	77.9%	25.3, 2DF $p<.0001$
Parents shaping state and local education policy	22.1%	30.6%	32.3%	3.3, 2DF $p=.1881$

Table 9

*Crosstabulation of Percentage Underrepresented Students*

<b>Workshop Topics</b>	Low %	Mid %	High %	$\chi^2$
Parents supporting child at home	88.5%	98.3%	100%	21.3, 2DF $p<.0001$
Expectations schools hold for parents	56.4%	74.3%	78.5%	16.8, 2DF $p=.0002$
Info on school instructional strategies	69.9%	80.1%	81.0%	5.9, 2DF $p=.0518$
Parents participating in decision making	52.6%	76.6%	79.8%	27.9, 2DF $p<.0001$
Parents shaping state and local education policy	25.6%	33.9%	29.1%	2.7, 2DF $p=.2601$

The patterns for the concentration of social class categories, emergent bilingual populations, and underrepresented students are similar. The results are consistently statistically significant, suggesting that there are meaningful differences across school characteristics for each of the workshop topics. For example, principals serving schools where greater than 67% of students receive free or reduced-priced meals are more likely to offer parents workshops on ways to support their child at home ( $\chi^2(2) = 16.8, p = .0002$ ; see Table 3.) The other workshop topics that were statistically significant were ones where principals provided information to parents about the schools' expectations and parents' participation in decision making. Similar patterns hold for principals serving schools with higher proportions of emergent bilingual students and underrepresented students, as shown in Tables 4 and 5. The disproportionate emphasis on the workshop topic of "parents participating in decision-making" in schools serving more students of color, working class students, and/or emergent bilinguals could be interpreted in various ways. One plausible explanation is that the results may reflect a propensity of schools designated as Title I to offer more parent workshops in general. Title I schools have more requirements than other schools for parents to be involved in decision making as well as funds designated for parent education. Principals may have understood the survey item as asking whether the school provides workshops that teach parents how to participate in decision-making or, conversely, could have understood the item as asking about parents' actual participation in decision-making. The first understanding would appear to conflict with the qualitative findings, described below, in which many principals socially constructed parents of color and working class parents as deficient and in need of training. The second understanding aligns with qualitative findings. However, drawing upon the interview data, we are able to unpack principals' rationales for offering workshops on various topics, illustrating how they construct certain groups of parents as learners and potential supporters of the school's agenda.

### **Principals' Construction of Parents**

We used the qualitative data to respond to our second research question, finding that the 34 interviewed principals, when discussing parent workshops, often constructed parents as lacking or deficient in knowledge and/or expressed the parents' role as supporting the school's agenda. However, principals sometimes voiced discourses that competed with these constructions, and oftentimes individual principals voiced competing discourses about parents.

In principals' constructions of parents when discussing workshops, they often made implicit race or social class allusions. For instance, many principals commented about immigrant, emergent bilingual ("English learner"), Spanish speaking, and/or Latinx parents as the targets of workshops. We recognize that immigration status, ethnicity, race, and home language are not synonymous; however, the principals often discursively conflated one or more of these, or subtly referred to ethnicity by referencing language or immigration. Out of the 34 interviewees, 19 directly or indirectly commented that the workshops were intended for immigrant, Latinx, emergent bilingual and/or Spanish speaking parents, using a variety of terms. Some references were subtle, such as discussing Spanish translation services at a workshop, or were implied by the topics of the workshops (such as English language or citizenship). Other references, though, entailed specifically naming "Latino" or "Hispanic" parents and explaining rationales for targeting these parents. In some cases, principals did not make clear the home language of parents who were reported to be learning English, so a Latinx identity cannot be certain. However, data from Table 1 suggest that many of the principals interviewed were at schools where more than 30% of the students were emergent bilingual students. Regardless, references to "immigrant," "English learner," "Spanish speaking," "Latino," and/or "Hispanic" identities connote racialized groups. As past research indicates, in schools, emergent bilingual and immigrant students are often racialized as students of color (Aud, Fox, &

KewalRamani, 2010; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Jimenez, 2012), an understanding that can be extended to parents.<sup>5</sup> In addition, some principals referenced other racialized groups of parents and/or working class or poor parents.

These subtle allusions to race and social class contextualize our in-depth discussion of findings related to the second research question, which we discuss in three subsections. First we discuss how principals constructed parents—oftentimes parents of color in particular—as lacking in formal education or literacy. Next, we examine how the principals' construction of parents as learners was tied to the construction of parents as potential supporters of the school agenda. Finally, we discuss the ways that principals advanced multiple and sometimes competing constructions of parents. Throughout these discussions, we illustrate (a) how principals socially constructed the target population of parents in general and parents of color and/or working class parents in particular, and (b) how these often-conflicting social constructions unfolded within *and* often reinforced a context of racism and inequity in educational policy and practice.

**Parents as learners.** Principals' stated or implied goals and rationales for workshops often belied an assumption that parents lacked literacy, adequate formal education, and/or an adequate culture, and needed to attend workshops to address these areas.<sup>6</sup> Their commentary illustrates the ways that the construction of parents as learners—as described in the Conceptual Framework section—often aligns with deficit discourse about parents, even though not all possible characterizations of parents as learners would imply a deficit lens. Also, this construction entails reductive understandings of literacy and learning (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), which involve narrow, singular conceptions of literacy that disregard the multiple and multimodal languages and literacies developed in home and community settings (Lee & Garcia, 2014; Martinez, Morales, & Aldana, 2017). Principals' assumptions about both parents and literacy were mediated by their understandings of race, ethnicity, and social class. Sometimes they conveyed either explicitly or implicitly that parents of color and/or working class parents in particular needed education. Below we delve into the ways that some principals constructed parents—especially parents of color and working class parents—as deficient in baseline education and literacy. We conclude this subsection by highlighting the inequitable social and policy context of the principals and possible relationships between the context and principals' comments about parents.

Of the 34 principals interviewed, 15 implied or stated that parents lacked literacy, facility in the English language, and/or formal education when discussing workshops. Some principals simply stated that they provided English or literacy workshops. For instance, Ms. Desjardins,<sup>7</sup> a white, female principal serving a school with a majority of students of color and a significant percentage of emergent bilingual students, provided an example. She stated, “We also do some literacy nights, you know, helping parents learn English.” Outside of her discussion of workshops, she addressed the societal and structural issues that created barriers for parents, such as the then-current economic crisis. She noted, “[W]e have a lot of parents that are not able to provide and help their kids as much as they would have maybe.” She then added, “The amount of kids we have coming in that are not native English speaking, or they're struggling learning English, and their families, as well, don't speak English, so helping with homework...is very difficult for them.” With these statements, Ms.

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<sup>5</sup> Race is a social construction rather than a biological fact (Omi & Winant, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Our discussion of deficit-oriented language throughout the findings section reflects such language specifically associated with discussions of stated and implied goals and rationales for parent workshops. Some principals voiced deficit language about parents and/or youth outside of their discussion of parent workshops.

<sup>7</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms.

Desjardins connected social inequity with her perception that working class parents and/or parents learning English lacked the capacity to “help their kids” in general and with homework specifically. By citing structural issues *and* her perception of parents’ struggles, she constructed parents as needing to learn because of issues beyond their control.

Other principals constructed parents, especially parents of color, through a more deficit-oriented lens less. One such principal, Mr. Arthur, described in-depth what he referred to as the school’s “Latino literacy program.” This principal, a white male serving a school with a majority of students of color and emergent bilingual students, described the program as entailing a small group of parents guided to work with a set of bilingual Spanish/English picture books “about the Latino experience in the United States.” In the program, he said, parents read the books with their children, opened lines of communication with their children, and created scrapbooks of their home literacy activities. Immediately following this description, Mr. Arthur was asked about why he thought it was important for parents to “develop this kind of understanding, this knowledge base.” In response, he stated:

When you look at the research on different socioeconomic classes and how they relate to their children, there is some evidence pointing to the amount of negative talk may be increased in families that are living under economically depressed conditions, compared to families that are middle class and upper where, you know, most of the conversation with their children is positive and language developing.

With this quotation, Mr. Arthur switched his terminology related to the parents. In describing the program, he referred to the target population as “Latino” parents. However, when probed about his rationale for the program, he referred to “families that are living under economically depressed conditions.” Thus, he appeared to conflate race/ethnicity with social class. His stated rationale for the parent workshops was the belief that working class or poor children (and, by association with the previous discussion, Latinx children) hear more “negative talk” in their homes. In contrast, he stated that in “families that are middle class and upper,” conversation “is positive and language developing,” thereby implying that conversation in working class homes is not only negative but also less “language developing.” Mr. Arthur conveyed this statement as fact rather than personal opinion, citing unspecified “research” and “evidence.” (However, though research has been mixed, much has refuted the claim that families of color or working class families provide a language-poor environment (Orellana & D’warte, 2010).) In characterizing working class (and, by implication, Latinx) parents as engaging in “negative talk” with their children, Mr. Arthur constructed them through a deficit lens. Also, his characterization of language in the home contrasted with his description of the literacy program, which appeared to respect the multiple home-based literacies of families. In the above quote, though, Mr. Arthur dismissed families’ home language practices as “negative talk.”

Mr. Arthur’s quotation illustrates how the construction of parents as learners may sometimes be related to the perception of cultural deficiency, in addition to a perception of a lack of literacy, formal education, and/or English. This cultural deficit viewpoint was evident in some, but not all, principals’ discussions of parenting skills and related workshops. Of the 34 interviewed principals, 18 of them mentioned or implied that parents need parenting skills, and 11 of these specified “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “immigrant,” “English learner,” or “Spanish speaking” parents as targets for workshops in general. Oftentimes principals referred to parenting classes or workshops, including those based upon commercially available parenting programs, such as Love and Logic ([www.loveandlogic.com](http://www.loveandlogic.com)). Several principals mentioned that they hold such workshops in order to provide opportunities for parents to gain strategies. For instance, one principal explained the

rationale for the parenting workshops this way: "To develop parent confidence and awareness, I think, in their parenting skills and creating strategies where they can enhance and improve their students' lives at home, that then would reflect back into schools." These parenting strategies, according to this principal, would ultimately benefit the school, a position echoed by some others.

One principal, Ms. Marshall, appeared to make the argument that some parents lack parenting skills because they lack formal education. This principal, a white woman at a school serving a majority of students of color and a significant proportion of emergent bilingual students, cited a list of experiences and cultural capital that parents at her school allegedly lacked:

Well, most, you know, a lot of our parents are either, some are illegal here and some aren't, and some work two or three jobs, they're not educated, some are illiterate, they haven't had an opportunity to learn these things, you know, it's just education. ... A lot of our parents need assistance with like, for example, parenting skills, you know, to know what to do when your child is tantruming that's effective, and to know how to, some of them didn't graduate school, they didn't get through school, or they didn't go to school. So there's a lot of stuff they don't know from experience that they're now needing to know to help their child succeed, you know.

Ms. Marshall referred to social class ("work two to three jobs") and also implied ethnicity or race with the comment that some parents "are illegal here." Some parents, she stated, are "not educated" and some are "illiterate." She connected a perceived lack of formal education with a perceived lack of understanding of how to manage a child who is having a tantrum, thereby socially constructing working class and immigrant parents as needy and lacking knowledge.

As Ms. Marshall and others illustrate, principals, drawing upon often reductive conceptions of literacy, constructed parents as learners in a variety of ways and often targeted parents of color and/or working class parents. Even when principals did not explicitly voice deficit views, their construction of parents as learners nonetheless entailed also constructing them as lacking knowledge or skills. In this way, these principals reflected the broader racist and classist education policy and practice landscape, which creates inequities in material resources and other forms of capital. All parents have rich, complex forms of cultural capital (such as language; Yosso, 2005); however, white, United States-centric, and/or middle to upper class capital is often more highly valued (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). A principal offering English classes for parents is not necessarily conveying a deficit narrative; however, she or he is an actor in a larger social and policy context that socially constructs immigrant or emergent bilingual parents as deficient. On the other hand, principals who explicitly socially construct parents as deficient actively support and legitimize education policy that constructs parents as requiring compensatory intervention.

**Parents as potential supporters of the school's agenda.** In discussing goals and rationales for workshops, many principals not only constructed parents as learners but also characterized them as potential supporters of the school's agenda. Of note, our analysis indicated that principals often constructed parent learning as a step toward them becoming supporters of the school. This was often stated or implied in discussions related to parents' perceived lack of literacy, English, formal education, and/or culture. For instance, as quoted in the previous subsection, a principal commented that workshops on parenting skills would improve students' lives and "reflect back into schools." Some principals more directly connected constructions of parents as learners and supporters of the school by, for instance, holding workshops on how to help children with academics. Oftentimes principals cited two areas of goals for workshops to explicitly advance the school's agenda: one related to skills and knowledge and another related to dispositions. Such approaches to workshops are widely accepted in the United States and viewed as appropriate, as

research and practice-oriented publications illustrate (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Henderson et al., 2007). We do not suggest that these goals for workshops are necessarily negative; indeed, parents may desire to learn how to help their children academically. Instead, we aim to delve into the social constructions that undergird this common practice, as shown in our data. In addition, we seek to illustrate inequities in social constructions of parents, with parents of color and/or working class parents often viewed through a deficit lens.

In terms of workshops targeting skills and knowledge, we found a range of goals related to supporting the school's agenda, and usually principals cited several of these. Here we highlight the four most prominent goals. The most general goal, mentioned by 18 of the 34 interviewed principals, was to encourage parents to support their children's education. Of these 18 principals, 15 of them cited emergent bilingual, Spanish-speaking, immigrant, "Latino," and/or "Hispanic" parents as at least one of the targets of workshops. (In comparison, only 5 of the 16 principals who did not cite this goal mentioned these specific populations.) Though this goal inherently suggests an assumption that parents insufficiently support their children's education, principals did not always frame it in this way. For instance, a white female principal in a majority-white, middle class school, commented, "The goals would be to support parents in supporting their kids' success at school, and success in life and emotionally." Her comment indicated her assumption that parents were already supporting their children's success.

However, oftentimes principals constructed parents, especially parents of color and working class parents, as deficient or lacking in terms of support for their children's education. General statements about this goal were *always* accompanied by statements about one or more of three other types of goals, which revealed underlying assumptions about parents' knowledge. One of these three goals, cited by nine principals, could be considered a normative, middle class, stereotypical baseline expectation of parents, entailing, for example, reading to the child, creating a space and time for homework completion, and using crayons. Of the nine principals, seven targeted emergent bilingual, Spanish-speaking, immigrant, "Latino," and/or "Hispanic" parents for workshops. For example, Ms. Leitner, a white, female principal who served a school with a majority of middle class white and Asian American students, commented:

First, educate the parents about what good parenting is. And to give them the tools of how to work with their children at home. So for instance, ...during my ELAC advisory meetings and those types of meetings I will talk about having places for them to do homework, how to support them.

An assumption underlying this statement was that at least some of the parents in the workshops did not share her normative conception of homework routines. A clue about which parents she felt needed remediation was her reference to "ELAC." In the state of California, education policy requires any public school serving more than 21 students learning English to form an English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC), which includes parents of emergent bilingual students, in addition to school staff. Hence, by mentioning "ELAC advisory meetings and those types of meetings," Ms. Leitner subtly referenced parents who speak languages other than English. Moments later, she expanded upon the idea of the homework routine and mentioned that parents with questions "can send a note in Spanish." Thus Ms. Leitner targeted Spanish-speaking parents, a numerical minority in her school, to impart normative knowledge about parenting and homework routines. In this way, she socially constructed Latinx parents as learners so they could enact normative homework practices and thereby support the school.

The most common goal of workshops as related to skills and knowledge focused on how to directly support academics at home, including helping with homework. This goal differed from the

goal of imparting baseline expectations of parents, such as creating a space to do homework. A total of 25 of the 34 interviewed principals cited this academics goal, which appeared to stretch across a variety of parent groups, with parents of color or working class parents sometimes specifically targeted. A white, female principal of a school serving a working class school with a majority of students of color, provided an exemplar of how principals constructed parents as related to this common goal:

Mainly just to give them the knowledge they need to support their students in learning, because a lot of parents don't know what to do at home. So when they come in and meet with their grade levels monthly, the teachers show them activities, or when you read a book, here's questions you can ask, comprehension questions."

Though this principal's commentary was more detailed than those of some other principals, it is representative in terms of the gist. In other words, principals often explained that workshops provided "activities" or "strategies" that parents could do with their children at home. These remarks indicated a possible assumption that at least some parents were unfamiliar with ways to provide what principals considered to be adequate academic support for the students. However, these comments did not necessarily presuppose a lack of middle class, normative knowledge, as did the comments described above.

Finally, 15 of the principals expressed that workshops were meant to convey information about the paradigm of the education system. Nine of these targeted emergent bilingual, Spanish-speaking, immigrant, "Latino," and/or "Hispanic" parents for workshops in general. Often these types of workshops touched on standardized testing, requirements for college, and grading systems. A representative example is a comment made by Latina principal at a school serving a majority of students of color: "We want to inform parents about what students are supposed to be learning at each grade level, so we share grade-level standards. We share the way that we will be monitoring their students' progress and progress report." Unlike the other three goals, this goal dealt with conveying knowledge that was not necessarily designed to spur action. The assumption behind this goal, then, contrasted with the assumptions underlying other workshop goals focused on conveying the importance of homework routines. Also, this goal, especially as conveyed by this principal, did not necessary construct parents as learners in order to support the school's agenda.

The four categories of goals related to skills and knowledge to support the school's agenda could be viewed as implicitly promoting certain dispositions. However, principals were often explicit about the dispositions that the workshops meant to foster. Most often, principals stated that they hoped to convey that education and parents' involvement in it was important. Thirteen principals voiced variations of this sentiment, nine of whom targeted emergent bilingual, Spanish-speaking, immigrant, "Latino," and/or "Hispanic" parents for workshops in general. For instance, a white, male principal at a school serving a moderate number of emergent bilingual students described one particular workshop:

[T]he whole idea of the workshop was to send a message to the parents that they're involved with their child's education, and their child's academic education, was essential. And if they wanted their child to succeed—and all parents love their children, want their kids to succeed—and so I think these parents came away with an enhanced understanding of their own role as their child's first and foremost teacher.

This principal made the point that all parents love their children and want them to succeed, but implied that parents might not already reflect the school's vision for their disposition of "being involved with their child's education" as "their child's first and foremost teacher." Another white,

male principal, at a school serving a large number of emergent bilingual students, made similar comments, but explicitly referenced race/ethnicity:

Well a lot, some of the cultures, especially the Hispanic families, is that schools know what they're doing and they take care of your kid. And so we have, you know, more in the American culture, it's parents have to be involved with their child's education, much more than they might be in other places in the world.

This comment not only promoted a normative conception of parental involvement but also implied that “Hispanic” parents are less “involved with their child’s education” than parents in “the American culture.” That is, the principal perceived a mismatch between the school’s expectations for parents and their behavior, and located this as a problem with parents rather than the school. This principal, as with others, socially constructed Latinx parents as deficient and needing to learn how to better academically support their children.

Overall, principals expressed that a prominent goal of workshops was for parents to enact school goals, moving from “parents as learners” to become “parents as potential supporters of the school’s agenda.” Parents in general were constructed in this way, especially as related to helping with academics at home, which is not necessarily a negative goal. However, Latinx parents were often specific targets of workshops and constructed through a deficit lens, especially in regards to enacting baseline normative expectations, such as creating homework routines. Hence, principals often socially constructed parents, especially parents of color and working class parents, as needing to learn to support the school’s agenda, a construction that belied a policy, institutional, and/or individual characterization of parents as lacking or deficient, even in the absence of explicitly deficit discourse.

**Alternative and conflicting social constructions of parents.** Just as there were deficit constructions of parents in principals’ discussions of workshops, there were also alternative or conflicting constructions that characterized parents, at least ostensibly, as holding valuable input and/or power. One way that principals constructed parents in ways that conflicted with deficit constructions was by characterizing them as donors or volunteers. Of the 34 principals interviewed, 13 of them mentioned parent donations or volunteering. However, these principals did not necessarily tie donations and volunteering to workshops; instead, they often mentioned parent-teacher organizations and fundraising. There were, however, eight principals who mentioned soliciting parent input related to workshop topics. As described by principals, schools garnered input through a variety of formal and informal ways. Some simply mentioned that they identified parents’ needs, while others discussed conducting surveys. A principal of color named Mr. Santos, who served a majority of students of color, is one who mentioned surveys:

Well, the first thing we do at the beginning of every year and our first day of school, we send a parent packet home and in the parent packet is a parents’ needs survey, sort of like a survey in terms of workshops and topics that they would like. ... we take a look at them and try to develop a set of workshops that will match what the parents are interested in.

Mr. Santos, in this quotation, made clear that the topic of parent workshops at his school aligned with the wishes of the parents, as expressed in the survey. Centering parents’ voice in this way contrasted how some principals constructed parents as learners and supporters of the school’s agenda. Though Mr. Santos still constructed parents as learners, he did not impose only his understanding of what knowledge they lacked.



Interestingly, Mr. Santos also advanced constructions of parents that were more deficit-oriented. In discussing the goals of parent workshops, he stated:

The goals are obviously to meet the needs of parents based on what the needs of the parent survey had, and to also get parents, especially our EL population, to get them to fully understand the importance of their support and providing help for their children what they could do at home.

Mr. Santos, then, had two sets of goals in mind for workshops, one related to the interests of the parents and the other related to his construction of parents as needing an understanding of their role in children's education. The second set of goals constructed parents as learners in order for them to support the school's agenda. Specifically, Mr. Santos said he targeted the "EL population"—parents learning English or parents of children learning English—for this second goal. Hence, Mr. Santos's commentary illustrates conflicting constructions of parents, specifically emergent bilingual parents, showing how the same principal could both disrupt and bolster deficit notions of parents, specifically parents of color.

In addition to mentioning parent input, some principals used terms related to empowerment and/or partnership. However, unlike comments about parent input, these terms were often used in ways that suggested the opposite, echoing previous research (Auerbach, 2010, 2012; Rodela, 2013; Warren, 2011). Six principals used words related to empowerment: "empower" (including the present progressive form of the verb) and/or "power." Eight principals used words related to partnership: "partnership" and "partner" (in noun form, both singular and plural uses). In total, 13 principals used one or both terms. These principals almost always used the terms in ways that did not connote parent voice or power, despite the surface-level meanings of the terms. Instead, principals used the terms to socially construct parents as potential enactors of the school's agenda. For example, Ms. Marshall, described above as a principal who constructed immigrant parents as needy, used the term "empower" in this way: "The goals [of the workshops]? Well, there are different classes. And it's just to empower parents, you know. One is a parenting class, one is how to help your child with math, another is how to help your child understand reading." Hence, for Ms. Marshall, to "empower" parents meant to teach them how to support the school's academic goals.

Principals used partnership terms in similar ways. For instance, Ms. Jansen, also a white, female principal serving a majority of students of color and significant number of emergent bilingual students, commented:

For our parents, and again, our community is 85% Latino, you know, 90% free and reduced lunch.... They don't have a sense of, as a parent, that "I have any contribution, that I have any way or ability to assist my child."... So we want to make parents see themselves as partners, we want parents to feel like, even though they might not speak English, there are things they can do with their child that will help them be successful.

Ms. Jansen began her commentary with demographic information about the school community, indicating that she was referring to a Latinx and working class population. She conveyed that parents at her school do not share her normative understanding of their role in relation to the school, which she interpreted as a lack of self efficacy to help their children academically. Latinx parents becoming partners, for this principal, would entail them adopting the dispositions that the school designated as valuable. The comments of Ms. Jansen and Ms. Marshall illustrate the contradictions that using empowerment or partnership terms entailed. Though these terms ostensibly signaled power, they

were usually used to indicate principals' desire for parents to support school-imposed dispositions and practices.

Overall, principals advanced some alternative and/or conflicting social constructions of parents that disrupted or appeared to disrupt constructions of them as deficient and needing to support the school's agenda. These contradictions occurred between principals and also within individual principal interviews. It is important to point out that these contradictions mirror those of public policy and some of the research and practitioner literature on parent engagement in schools. As described in the Literature Review and Conceptual Framework sections, policy has variously constructed parents as deficient, reflecting compensatory programs such as Head Start, or as co-designers of school-parent compacts, for example. As the theory of social construction and policy design asserts, social construction occurs not only within the text of a policy but through mutual systems of influence involving society, institutions such as schools, and individual actors in institutions, such as principals. Practitioner literature not only emphasizes parents as actors to help improve test scores but also promotes the idea of sharing power with parents (and these two approaches can both occur in the same publication, such as Henderson et al., 2007). These conflicting constructions are understandable when considering the policy context that pushes principals to rapidly boost test scores while also considering parent input.

## Discussion

Our study illustrates how elementary principals provide structural support for parents to participate in meetings and that those structures of support were more prevalent in schools serving more racially and linguistically diverse student populations as well as schools serving higher proportions of low-income families. This was a promising finding that indicates a willingness among principals in our sample to foster greater participation from parents by providing supports that facilitate their increased engagement in schools. However, our study also explores the complexities of principals' social constructions of parents, particularly parents of color and working class parents. In addition, we demonstrate that principals often construct parents as learners, sometimes belying an assumption—on their part or that of policy—of a lack or deficiency. This construction is often meant to be in service of shaping parents to become supporters of the school's agenda. However, some principals constructed parents as valuable contributors and/or advanced conflicting constructions of them. This study points to several insights related to theory, practice, and policy.

In terms of practice, our study points to the importance of providing structural supports for engaging parents in schools. This may serve as an important symbol that parents are welcome in the schools. Scholars have noted the need for schools to develop more inclusive practices that support parent engagement in schools, such as hosting parent meetings outside of work hours, offering child care, providing meals, and offering translation services for linguistically diverse families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009). Our study provides contextual evidence that suggests elementary schools are beginning to take up some of these practice-based recommendations about how to engage parents more fully. Moreover, it appears that principals at schools serving parents of color and working class families were more likely to offer key structural supports to engage parents in meetings. However, it is important to note that offering structural support that makes it easier for parents to engage in schools is necessary, but not sufficient, to support the authentic democratic engagement of families in schools. Principals' mindsets about parents and their sense of the contributions parents can make are contributing factors as well.

In terms of theory, our findings shed light on the theory of social construction and policy design (Ingram et al., 2007). Specifically, they illustrate that parents of color and working class

parents are constructed as deficient in comparison to a white, middle class norm. However, the theory's axes of deserving/undeserving and power/lack of power did not entirely map onto the findings of our study. Principals usually constructed parents as lacking power, but the driving force behind the workshops did not appear to be constructions of parents as deserving or undeserving. Instead, the motivation appeared to be the degree and type of instrumentality of parents to the school's goals. Principals' construction of instrumentality appeared to vary by the relative level and type of perceived value that parents could provide a school, ranging from creating a homework routine for their children to contributors of ideas. Principals' constructions of instrumentality, as shown by our analyses, are highly influenced by their understandings of parents' race, ethnicity, and social class. Principals often constructed working class and/or parents of color as deficient and requiring remediation, and less capable of enacting the school's agenda.

Another insight of the study is related to deficit views about parents. Some principals advanced cultural deficit ideology (Valencia, 1997), but others simply stated or implied that parents lacked resources or knowledge. Though these understandings are vastly different, they advance or reflect a social construction of parents as inherently needy (Swadener, 2010). This understanding of parents is perhaps reflected in principals' understanding of the term "parent workshops," used in the interview protocol. These constructions are intimately connected to education policy, which, as described above, often constructs parents of color and/or working class parents as deficient. As the theory of social construction and policy design demonstrates, people in institutions—like principals in schools—play a role in the social construction of target populations and future policy. We do not suggest that offering to teach parents knowledge and skills is wrong or that parents do not benefit from workshops and trainings. Instead, we argue that an understanding of workshops as solely transmitting knowledge from school personnel to parents is problematic. Alternatively or in addition, a "parent workshop" could be imagined as a forum to co-construct knowledge or a space in which parents could teach school administrators and faculty about the best approaches to working with their children.

The inherent deficit assumptions of parents embedded in typical conceptions of parent workshops need to be addressed in order to realize the potential of education policies that seek to include parents in educational decision making. As explained earlier in the article, Title I incentivizes schools to work with parents. In the state of California, the context of this study, schools are required to have English Learner Advisory Committees and include parents of emergent bilingual children. Also, as mentioned above, in 2013, California passed the Local Control Funding Formula law, requiring parent participation in district budget decisions. Parents cannot be authentic participants in educational decision making, as called for by these policies, if principals solely construct them as needing to learn knowledge and skills. Instead, principals could construct parents—particularly parents of color and working class parents—as fellow leaders in education (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2018; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Also, considering the complex role of principals, an additional or alternative approach could be to more systematically position community-based organizations as facilitators of parent participation and joint decision-making between parents and principals.

Parents of color and working class parents have often been at the forefront of challenging racism and other forms of inequity in schools, serving as a driving force in efforts toward social justice in education (Fernández, 2016; Freelon, Manuscript submitted for publication; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). If the goal is to advance equity, schools have much to gain or lose in terms of principals' social constructions of parents. Principals may reproduce deficit constructions of parents and further entrench inequity or, conversely, they

can acknowledge and even promote the leadership of parents. Working in tandem, principals and parents can co-create more possibilities to advance social justice in education.

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