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# The Voices of Parents: Rethinking the Intersection of Family and School

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In this study, we explored ideas and attitudes about education among low-income, minority parents to understand their interaction patterns with schools. Although the bulk of research on parent involvement has been aimed at demonstrating its effects, few field-based studies have focused on the factors that contribute to parents' participation in home and school-based activities. In this study, we attempted to identify these factors by examining the source (e.g., culture, community, institutionalized norms) and nature of parent ideas about schooling.

Semistructured interviews regarding the parent's educational experiences, their views about the value of schooling, their role in their children's education, and the nature of their interactions with their children's schools were conducted with parents from a single school located in a minority community in northern California. In contrast to the perceptions of many principals and teachers, low instances of parent involvement did not reflect a parental lack of interest in their child's development. Instead, although such factors as time, distance, and day care obligations were cited, it seemed clear that patterns of family-school interactions were controlled by highly defined, socially constructed scripts that institutionalize the relationships among parents, teachers, and school administrators.

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Widespread support for parent involvement is reflected by its inclusion in nearly every policy proposal aimed at improving the performance of our nation's schools. Repeated calls for "parent empowerment" identify the improvement of family-school relationships as a key weapon in the struggle to slow the downward slide in academic indicators. Goals 2000, the legislative mandate for expanded federal action to improve public education, locates objectives for increased parental involvement side by side with strategies focused on curriculum content and student achievement (Smrekar, 1996). The burden of meeting such goals, however, has in general been left to the schools. The objective of increased parent involvement encourages schools to create programs and roles for parents. In this politicized environment, the voice of the parent can easily go unheard. Moreover, when the opinions of the very population whose involvement is desired are ignored, a precedent may be set that may directly impact the nature of family-school interactions.

In this study, we explored low-income, minority parents' ideas and attitudes about schooling. We examined the source (e.g., culture, community, institutionalized factors) and nature of these ideas and their relation to patterns of parent involvement in school. We posed these central questions: In the context of programs, policies, and gimmicks designed to involve parents in particular school activities, what did parents think about school? How did these ideas relate to actual patterns of family-school interactions?<sup>1</sup>

We understand that an exploration of the relationship between parents and schools is, by definition, dually formed; that is to say, how parents perceive their role in their children's schooling may be a function of how the school organization treats them. However, in this study, we deliberately isolated a single influence, parents' ideas and attitudes about schooling, to better understand parents' involvement in schooling from the perspective of the participants themselves. There was no attempt to compare perspectives of teachers and parents. Although teachers were asked about school programs and policies related to parental involvement, these discussions were used to formulate specific questions for use in our semistructured interviews with parents. As a consequence of this strategy, the article is dom-

<sup>1</sup>It was neither the design nor the intent of this study to examine the assertions embedded in the research on social class differences in family life as they relate to particular childrearing practices, occupational socialization, and educational values (see Bronfenbrenner, 1966; Heath, 1982; Kohn, 1969, 1971; Rubin, 1976; Wright & Wright, 1976). The interest here rested solely with the examination of low-income, minority parents' values as they relate to schooling and the relation of these values, ideas, and attitudes to perceived and self-reported patterns of school participation.

inated by the reflections and rich descriptions of the parents to distill from them the factors, if any, that influenced their involvement. Similarly, although we recognize that the way parents interact with the school may be mediated to some degree by the performance and behavior of their children, it was not our intention to link the specific behavior of a child to patterns of family-school interactions; doing so is left to our colleagues interested in whether institutional responses exist in schools to deal with categories of behaviors. In sum, the primary focus or unit of analysis rests with the home, and as such, we present the reflections of parents as they considered the value of schooling, the meaning of parent involvement, and the nature of school-family relationships. This primacy accorded to parents' voices reflects our conscious effort to avoid distorting their stories.

### Definitions

For the purposes of this study, *parent* is defined broadly to include the adult with responsibility for the financial and emotional care and support of the school-age child. This definition recognizes the rich diversity of family structures, which may include other family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings) or a guardian in a primary caretaker role.

The term *schooling* is invoked to locate parents' beliefs in the context of the formal institution of public education. It was not within the focus of this study to examine broader conceptions of education shaped and influenced by a myriad of institutions, experiences, and actors.

Finally, *parent involvement* is considered within a broad framework of experiences and activities located in both the home and school. Parents, in this context, might serve as adviser, advocate, supporter, colearner, tutor, employee, or audience (see Brandt, 1979; P. R. Brown & Haycock, 1984; Criscuolo, 1986). Often termed *instructional partnerships* (Crowson & Boyd, 1996) or *home-school partnerships* (Epstein, 1995; Swap, 1993), parent involvement has come to represent broadly defined degrees of involvement.

### Background

Most of the research on parent involvement has examined its effects on students, parents, and teachers. Findings indicate that involvement enhances parents' attitudes about themselves, school, school personnel, and the role each plays in the development of the child (Becher, 1986; Gordon, 1979; Henderson, 1981; Keesling & Melaragno, 1983; Rich &

Jones, 1977). Teachers also benefit from parental involvement by gaining insights about students and their home environment (Epstein, 1985). This increased understanding promotes greater cooperation, commitment, and trust between the parents and teachers. Substantial evidence suggests that achievement and cognitive development increase when effective parent involvement practices are in place (Comer, 1980, 1988; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Goodson & Hess, 1975; Henderson, 1987; Hobbs, 1978; Hobbs et al., 1984; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Rich, 1985; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Although some studies have explored the broader impact of parent involvement programs on the social relationships among community, school, and home (see Comer, 1988), only recently have researchers begun to examine the factors influencing parent participation. Epstein and colleagues have explored the effects of teacher attitudes toward parents and their skill in developing parent-involvement strategies (see Epstein, 1985; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Other researchers have used ethnographic techniques to explore the beliefs and conceptions of parents with regard to school involvement but have focused only on a select group of parents defined as "active participants" (Shields & McLaughlin, 1986).

In a recent book, Swap (1993) reported that despite high verbal support for parent involvement among educators and parents alike, "parents continue to be kept at a distance in most schools" (p. 13). Swap explored what she called "powerful barriers" that restrict or inhibit teachers and administrators from outreaching to parents. Changing demographics that restrict the time and availability of teachers and parents alike, school norms that reflect hierarchy over reciprocity, limited resources, and a lack of knowledge about how to involve and motivate parents were identified as key barriers. In this article, we hope to identify the barriers that inhibit parents from involving themselves in schools by focusing on the parental voice. What can parents tell us that will elucidate their own participation patterns?

We recognize that parents' perceptions of the school organization also reflect the larger community context—the history of school–community relationships, the size and stability of ethnic groups—as well as the larger intergovernmental context (Shields, 1987). As such, after we describe our methods, we give a brief historical overview of the school–community climate as presented to us by administrators and parents.

In addition, Smrekar (1996) and others have posited that family characteristics and, especially, social class may work to interact with school organization to create the nature and quality of family–school relationships. To

examine these connections, in the next section, we explore parents' ethnicity, social class, education levels, and school-related experiences.

In the third section, we strive to locate the voices of parents in a broader institutional perspective. How might institutional theory inform the debate over parent involvement? We report the attitudes and behaviors of school staff, the degree to which parents felt the school was doing a good job, the tenor of relationships between parents and the school, and the set of institutional arrangements that influenced the way parents participated in schooling. We draw on the ideas of institutional theorists to help explain how elements that come from both inside and outside the schools work to hinder reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of family-school interactions. By including these ideas, we address whether the "we-they" division that Henry (1996) identified in her interviews with school personnel is evident in the words of parents.

In this study, we did not seek to verify, validate, or otherwise demonstrate the importance of parent involvement. Rather, we proceeded from a fundamental belief that parent involvement is a good idea and that it represents a powerful and potentially vital mechanism with which to enhance the relationships between home and school.

## Methodology

### *Site*

The site for this study was a public elementary school located in a minority community in northern California and was selected for its appropriateness, familiarity, and proximity. The community was primarily composed of low-income Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander (Samoan) families. The majority of the Hispanic and Pacific Islander residents were first-generation immigrants to the United States. The elementary school enrolled 400 students in grades K–6; of these, 48% were African American, 35% were Hispanic, and 17% were Pacific Islander or other.

### *Selection*

To study parent-school interaction across grade levels, we selected parents from each of three classrooms: second, fourth, and sixth grades. Reflecting a random stratified sampling process, we interviewed a random sample of 30 families (10 from each classroom) via telephone. The

10 groups of parents isolated as the final sample reflected a set of family characteristics that were in common with the majority of families at the school. This selection process yielded a representative sample of parents across several dimensions, including relationship to children in school (e.g., mother, father, grandparent), length of time in the school district, length of time in the community and country, and affiliation with school-based groups as well as critical demographic factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, occupation, educational experience, and income. The strength of these selected cases is considered adequate to offset any limitations inherent in a single-site study design (Kennedy, 1979; Yin, 1989).

### *Design*

The research strategy developed for this study involved a series of in-depth interviews with the parents. The qualitative methodology selected corresponded to the nature of the data sought: parent attitudes, self-reported behavior, and the exploration of interactions and exchanges (Fetterman, 1989; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Yin, 1989).

Access to the school site was gained through the school principal, with the cooperation of the classroom teachers. A comfortable relationship had been established with the school staff over the previous year through Smrekar's participation in a university-sponsored tutoring program. We had no previous interactions with parents, however. Interviews took place in the parents' home and were tape-recorded with their permission. A translator accompanied us to the homes of Spanish-speaking families. Their words are presented here as they were translated.

Interview questions were clustered around four general themes and were intentionally nondirective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) to trigger broad, comprehensive responses. The core clusters included (a) educational background and experiences, (b) ideas about the meaning and value of schooling, (c) ideas about the role of parents in their children's schooling, and (d) relationships between parents and schools.

### *Data Analysis*

Interview transcripts were coded and summarized according to general descriptive categories. Pattern coding (Fetterman, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1989) was used to discover patterns among individuals and descriptive categories. Before making any assertions regarding a pattern, we conducted a search for data that opposed or was inconsistent

with these conclusions. The portrait of families and schools presented here emerged through repeated transcript analyses.

## Findings

### *Community Context*

Members of minority groups (African Americans, Latinos, and Pacific Islanders) represented the majority in this community have for nearly 25 years. During this time, the urgent imperatives of economic survival have replaced battles over self-determinacy. Ethnic minority groups have dominated city and school governance for the past 2 decades; when the study was conducted members of the city council and school board, the superintendent, and the majority of principals and school staff were African American. Despite the minority majority, the Bilingual Parents Association was the only organized interest group involved in any significant school decision making. According to many school officials, parents, and community members, a combination of confidence and complacency operated in the district, despite persistent financial and school performance concerns. Most described relationships between families and schools over the past decade as generally cordial in the absence of any demonstrable racial conflicts or class divides.

### *Parental Factors*

The pool of final participants approximately mirrored the ethnic composition of the elementary school as a whole. Of the 10 sets of parents interviewed, 4 were African American, 4 were Hispanic, and 2 were Pacific Islander. The family members interviewed for this study were remarkably diverse. Within the 4 Black families who participated, two grandmothers with responsibility for their school-age grandchildren were interviewed. In the third family, the mother was interviewed, and in the fourth, both parents were interviewed. In 3 out of the 4 Hispanic (Mexican origin) families, only the mother was interviewed; in the fourth family, the father alone participated. In the 2 Pacific Islander families, the father in the first family was interviewed; both parents in the second family participated.

Parents also differed in employment patterns. Five of the participants were unemployed at the time the interview was conducted. Of these, 1 parent was retired, 1 was in rehabilitation for a work-related injury, and 1



was studying for a licensure exam. Of the remaining 7 interviewees, 6 were employed full time.<sup>2</sup> The types of industries employing these parents ranged from manufacturing to banking. Positions held included machine operator, nursery hand, and customer service representative. Of the 12 parents interviewed, only 1 was employed in the white-collar sector.

In addition, the families represented a broad cross-section in terms of their children's behavior and achievement in school. Some parents were filled with pride and enthusiasm about their children's academic success and spoke of their children's school awards and community service certificates. Other parents were weary from prolonged battles between their children and school officials. Many expressed relief that their children were "surviving." Some were parents of children in gifted programs; others were struggling to keep their children in school and off the reportedly drug-infested streets. All acknowledged the immense challenge of parenting.

*Parents' educational background and school experiences.* In the sample group of 10 families, we found widely differing educational experiences. The majority of parents completed their education in their native country (four in Mexico, two in Samoa). Educational attainment varied from the fourth grade to a 4-year college degree. Hispanic parents had an average of 6 years of schooling, the maximum number of years that free public education is provided in Mexico. Only one parent in the group came from a home in which their mother or father had graduated from college.

Many parents reported that their schooling had been cut short because of family obligations or economic difficulties. A Mexican mother of six remembered her own limited experience with formal schooling:

I grew up on a ranch. My schooling was difficult because I could only attend school 4 or 5 months of the year. My family did not have everything we needed for the kids to attend school, like books and pencils. Sometimes we didn't have teachers or a school building; we took our chairs and sat under the shade of a tree. I went to school until the third or fourth grade.

An African American grandmother of three recalled:

<sup>2</sup>The seventh parent in this group was the unemployed wife in one of the two dual-parent interviews.

I was raised in the country in Arkansas. We had to pick cotton. By the time we started school, it would be the middle or end of October. We would miss so much of schooling, you had to work so hard to try to catch up with the classes.

Other parents suggested that their childhood experiences differed dramatically from their children's, both in school and out. For some, the cultural differences between their native countries and the United States were striking, as these Pacific Islander parents of four related:

School back in the islands ... you didn't really have any free time as opposed to the school system over here. Back home, when you go to school, and after school, I already had so many things lined up for me to do. There was social time but not the kind of social thing that I'm looking at over here.

The interview transcripts revealed a tendency for these parents to compare their own childhood experiences with those of their children. Where parents discussed their disgruntlement over their children's lives, however, the comparisons were more often made in relation to nonschool elements. With the exception of the parent who characterized her Pacific Islander teachers as much more "aggressive" than their American counterparts and one Hispanic parent who wished the curriculum could include practical components such as sewing and horticulture, parents remarked about children's excessive amount of free time, lack of chores, and contact with easily available drugs.

Many parents recalled the role their own parents had played in their schooling. These experiences seem to provide a framework for thinking about school involvement with their own children. A mother of six who worked as a nursery hand recalled:

My parents did not seek better schooling for us. Partly out of ignorance—they didn't know about other schooling for us, and we couldn't go far from our ranch. So the schooling we received was what was available to us on the ranch.

A youth development worker who emigrated from the Pacific Islands in the 1970s remembered the emphasis that her own parents placed on education:

My father was a real good role model. He was very supportive, and he was a hard worker. He was the only wage earner back home to care for 15 kids. He was always worried about us getting an education, reading

with us every night, dealing with our homework every night, as hard as he worked out there in the fields.

From a Spanish-speaking mother of six, we heard:

My education is kind of sad. I wasn't able to learn anything. I can't say that I graduated from this school or was educated in that school. I cannot be proud of any accomplishments because I didn't have any ... but my kids should have more than I did.

A second Mexican mother of six recalled her experiences with formal schooling in this way:

I got up early and made breakfast and brought it to [my father] in the fields. If I didn't get back in time for school, it was just too bad. In the months of September and October, we would help in the fields, growing corn, squash, tomatoes. So during that time, we didn't go to school at all.

An African American mother of one told us:

I always wanted to be like my mother. And even if I didn't get there, I always tell my daughter that I want her to get further in life than I did. I have a number of things I can do to make money. I finished cosmetology school ... but I don't want her to have to deal with hair when she can be a lawyer or something.

How parents experienced formal schooling themselves, whether in or outside of the United States, was clearly reflected in their subsequent wishes for their own children. Regarding her own role in her children's schooling, a Mexican mother of six stated that her primary responsibility was to support and encourage her children to attend school so that "later on they won't say that they didn't go because Mom never said I should." Similarly, the Pacific Islander parents described their responsibility in relation to the way they themselves were raised, stating that they must primarily "act as role models."

*The meaning and value of school versus nonschool factors.* The importance of discovering parents' views about the meaning and value of schooling rested with the unchallenged explanations that some observers have rendered regarding the historically low educational performance and attainment of low-income, minority children. The view that minority parents with

low educational attainment attach little value or interest to schooling was echoed in early discussions with the principal and other school staff. These officials suggested that most of the parents in the school were lazy, irresponsible, and apathetic when it came to school involvement and that these attitudes were inextricably linked to the low performance of their children. More striking than the tenor of these remarks, however, was the certainty with which they were delivered.

School officials warned that it was unsafe and unwise to enter the school neighborhood and conduct interviews at parents' homes. Teachers warned that we would be lucky to get one third of the initially contacted parents to participate. Instead, only 1 parent out of 15 initially contacted was unable or unwilling to participate. Welcomed warmly and politely into all the homes, we sensed a strong desire on parents' part to simply be heard and to feel that their opinions were important and valuable. Furthermore, 9 of the 10 sets of parents interviewed responded that, if asked, they would find ways to increase their involvement at home and at school. The following observations and interviews may not alter these views, but they offer a competing perspective for school officials and others to consider.

Many of the parents reported that they viewed schooling as a vehicle for financial success. They remarked that changes in technology and work conditions have made it necessary to have at least a high school diploma, and most expressed the hope that their children would earn a college degree. Some Mexican parents noted that in the United States, educational credentials and educational attainment are emphasized to a greater degree than they are in Mexico. To these parents, the primary outcome of schooling was a good job or professional career. One Pacific Islander couple we interviewed noted that they had emigrated to the U.S. seeking "a better life" and realized that a "good education" was a necessary precondition for economic success. The husband, a father of four young children, continued:

Nowadays you have to have a good education to do anything in life. You even have to have a degree to dig ditches. Back then, you didn't really have to have a good education, just a good backbone to do anything. School is important because you gotta live, and to live, you gotta work, unless you get into that selling dope like those other [people] that line the street.

Although some parents stressed that the most important outcome of schooling was the acquisition of social skills—respect, the ability to get along with others, self-discipline—other parents identified particular aca-

demic subjects that they considered vital. The African American grandmother and retired nurse's aide remarked:

There is some subjects that I think is important—English, math. I never did see that history was so very important to children. I didn't care for it.

The Pacific Islander father whose college major was English emphasized the need for a strong language arts program:

In the classroom, I would ... Grammar is something I can't see being emphasized in the classroom. So it's language that I would put my emphasis on because writing, speaking, thinking are all things that would come about ... as opposed to science and math.

It was evident in these interviews that the school experiences of parents—in this case with regard to specific subjects of study—shaped the views they held about the values and outcomes of formal schooling. Beyond the importance parents assign to specific categories of knowledge, the way in which parents view the intersection of social and educative institutions has implications for the value they attach to formal education. When parents were asked whether schooling was as important as other experiences in their children's intellectual development and if there were other ways or places that their children could learn important ideas, the responses revealed poignant and illustrative lessons about learning and life:

I think they learn them [values] in church. They learn an awful lot from TV, too. [My daughter] has a TV in her room, so she's watching things that I don't know about. She watches cartoons everyday. I hope she's learning something from it. Other things they learn on the street—the cursing, you know. They learn a lot in the street, bad things. Not the good ones.

They learn lots of important things from lots of places. Church—you can learn a lot—being a responsible person, sharing person, and being a good person all around. The same thing in regards to working.

Another parent recalled nonschool childhood experiences that laid a foundation for a lifelong interest in and appreciation for reading:

I learned some in school, but I learned more about life and about everything out of school. In fact, I used to read a lot. When you live in the country, you're really poor. We would take the newspapers that my dad

would get from his boss, and we would make paste and paper the walls with the newspapers. And I would lay up in bed and read the newspapers on the wall. And that's where I really learned a lot, by reading the newspapers.

Despite these rich and varied descriptions of nurturing and educative nonschool experiences, many parents expressed a belief in the value of formal education for successful adulthood. Parents talked about their efforts to keep their kids in school. Many parents reported that their eldest children had or were considering dropping out of school. Some parents suggested that they had tried to instill in their children a belief in the importance of schooling but that the decision to stay in school ultimately belonged to their children. Others expressed concern that their children's interest in material rewards—clothes, cars, and jewelry—was creating a temptation to find employment and to discontinue their schooling:

One of my daughters wants to be a doctor, another a lawyer, and another one a pilot. Hopefully, they will do something. But they also want to go to school well dressed. I can't supply them with the clothes that they want. And that's the time when they start thinking about working instead.

### *Institutional Perspectives*

How did parents describe their role in their children's schooling? What factors seemed to shape patterns of parental involvement? We suggest that the roles that parents play in their children's schooling reflect their more general ideas and attitudes about schooling. These ideas, however, may be mediated by the socially constructed roles that both parents and school officials take for granted and execute faithfully. Institutional theory posits that socially constructed roles and norms develop informally and come to denote the proper ways organizations should function. The institutional environment then sanctions similar organizations on the basis of these norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Parents learn over time the circumscribed roles that they are expected to assume. They learn to think of themselves more as supporters, helpers, and fund raisers than decision makers, partners, and collaborators.

*The role of parents in schooling.* The consistency with which this diverse group of parents regarded two tasks, attendance at meetings and assistance

with homework, as encompassing the universe of parent roles was stunning. The following exchanges suggested an almost reflexive, conditioned response to questions about their responsibilities. There was a sense in this consistency that parents' roles in school were prescribed: "The structuring of organizational interaction requires members [parents] to rely upon shared but largely tacit background knowledge that is embodied in an organizational paradigm. Roles ... are afforded by the dominant model" (R. Brown, 1978, p. 374). The important point here is that institutionalization produces common understandings about what is appropriate and, fundamentally, meaningful behavior for parents to display (Zucker, 1983).

In the following cases, parents assumed that their role involved attendance at school meetings. Failure to fulfill this prescribed role produced feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and regret:

I don't go to meetings like I should. But if the teachers call me up, or if it's a special meeting that I need to go to, I try to go.

There are a lot of interesting things that go on at different meetings. And if I don't go to all the meetings, I might miss something, something important. Okay, but I don't go to all of them. Well, I don't go to no meetings, really. Because I have church meetings, and other meetings to go to.

Moreover, all of the parents likened their responsibility to monitoring their children's homework. Some parents saw their role in this regard delimited by the particular skills, formal education, and knowledge they possessed. A hint of apology echoed in their voices as they described what they could do in terms of what they were unable to do:

My job is sending my kids to school. I can't help them with their homework because I had little schooling myself. I ask my children how they are doing, what homework they have, and have they done it. My job is to find out if they have any notes from school and to keep on top of what is happening there.

Several of the Mexican parents reported that their limited English made it difficult to participate as fully as they would like. A few Mexican parents spoke of the way in which their limited English ability limited their ability to advance their children's academic success:

I cannot help with homework because I don't speak English. I can help my little daughter with numbers and her ABCs. I can help my fourth

grader with some of the math. But, I tell them that they just have to ask the teacher other times.

Other parents expressed interest in participating in ways they deemed appropriate, given their talents and time constraints:

I wish there were more practical things for me to do with the kids, such as sewing and maybe carpentry. I make beautiful lace tablecloths. Perhaps for a half an hour or hour I could help at the school, helping with these types of activities.

To better describe their own role in the schooling of their children, some parents drew a distinction between the moral training they could provide and the academic instruction they believed the schools could and should deliver. Other parents reflected on the intersection of parents and teachers and their sometimes conflicting roles. From an African American woman with three grandchildren in the public school system, we heard:

My role is different than the teacher's because the teacher teach them. She give them book learning. I try to teach them the values of life. You know, what to do and what not to do. Put them on the right track.

The Pacific Islander mother who worked at a youth center in the community distinguished her role from that of the teacher. However, she also extended the role of the teacher to becoming involved in student's home lives to construct individual learning and development plans:

I think it's [teacher-parent responsibility] two distinctive roles. The teacher has to learn what's going on in this child's life. Once you understand what's going on in the life of the child, in the home, then you have a better idea how to approach this kid.

Though most parents took pains to delineate the separate roles that teachers and parents should take in regard to the schooling of children, some parents emphasized the concept of schools as an extension and reinforcement of the family. Many of the Mexican parents in the study explicitly rejected the compartmentalized roles of parents and teachers. The teacher-as-parent role and the seamless relationship between home and school was outlined this way:

I believe that school is better in Mexico. Here, the teachers can't touch the kids. In Mexico, if the kids don't do their homework, the teachers can



punish them, so the kids won't be disrespectful. In Mexico, if you have dirty hands, or long fingernails, the teachers can hit you. There, the teachers are like parents and they can discipline the kids, because it's for their own good.

The teacher is like the second parent. School is where their behavior is formed, apart from the home. The school is perhaps more important because I cannot be at home very much; I must work. So the school plays an important role in doing what I cannot.

It was interesting to juxtapose this view of the teacher's role with parents' perspectives about their own delimited roles. Although the Mexican mothers indicated that teachers should in essence "become" the parent during school hours, they never iterated the view that parents should involve themselves as teachers. With respect to how these parents would suggest increasing parental participation, they ascribed the role of decision maker to the school officials and described themselves as mere observers. Regarding whether they would like to involve themselves in decisions about what happened at school, one parent stated that "Those are decisions that people at the school should make. Otherwise, I would have to be more informed." In terms of increased participation, the same parent noted only that "they could invite us to the classroom so that we could see what they are doing." The roles of parents and the home have themselves been institutionalized over time. The idea that parents ought not interfere with the job of teaching school curricula seems to transcend culture and experience.

*Institutionalized interactions: Relationships between parents and schools.*

Institutional theory posits that activity has ritual experience; it maintains appearances and validates the legitimacy and status of an organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). School-based activities for parents are often prearranged, formal ceremonies and events organized by school officials (sometimes with the help and cooperation of the PTA or a like group). These events include back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, PTA socials, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, Black History Month events, and international food festivals.

The explanations parents provided for their involvement in school-based ceremonies reflected the profound significance these events held for parents and children. The structured interactions began to render a broader set of meanings for parents than schools perhaps intended. Attendance

(or absence) became a proxy measure of love, care, and concern beyond the realm of schooling:

You should see the little kids, my kids' face light up when they see me walk in. See they tell me before they leave, "Nanny, be sure and be there." It's going to be at so and so time. I said, "Okay, I'll be there." And they touch their little friends and say, "That's my Nanny." You know, they be happy. That's the kind of support a kid need. If you don't show them you're interested in them, what the heck, they'll just cut school.

When my children ask me, "Daddy can you come have Thanksgiving dinner with me [at school]?" Oh, I drop everything because that moment, they will remember it for their life. And I won't forget that. And I ask the other little kids, "Did you ask your mommy?" Then they put their little heads down, keep watching the door, waiting for their parents to come because they told them they would come. But nobody shows up.

When asked about factors that limit their participation in school-designed programs, many parents responded to perceived criticism about their level of participation in their children's schooling. Parents pointed to work, child care, church, and household chores as obligations that hindered their involvement in schooling:

When you come home from work, you're tired. The kids are tired. The kids got to do their homework. You got to cook dinner. You don't have time enough to really be with them. On the weekends, the parents are trying to do housework and everything. And then on Sunday, most people go to church. And then on Sunday night, you're trying to get ready for Monday.

The grandmothers with primary responsibility for their school-age grandchildren pointed to their ill health (e.g., back trouble, arthritis), which limited their mobility and allowed for only infrequent trips outside their home.

Some parents expressed concern about the impression their patterns of school involvement left with school officials. One parent who noted that she did not leave her home very often and did not communicate with a lot of people, observed:

Parents do support schools. They do their duty by sending their children to school. But schools and teachers get left with the responsibility of the

kids. I feel parents should support teachers more so that they won't get discouraged.

Other parents were openly critical of other school parents whom they perceive as uncaring, apathetic, and irresponsible. They worried about the effects of noninvolvement on the attitudes and behavior of these parents' children. A parent who was a member of the school advisory council criticized other parents who failed to participate in school-based activities:

[Is there] enough parent involvement opportunities? I say yes. [Is it the] right kind of opportunity? It's unknown. Because the right kind of opportunity—the school cannot find it. The parents have to come and tell them what kind they need. Parents are so involved in something else. You know they think about their children: wash your face, and go to school. And they think that's all, but it's not. I try to spend almost 1 hour with my children a day.

*Explaining family-school interactions: A provider-receiver model.* Structured interactions delimit communication between families and schools to formal, abrupt, and incomplete exchanges. Time and space are highly regulated within this domain. Unannounced visits to the classroom are discouraged; parents are expected to check in at the front office counter or to make prearrangements with a school official. Parents are seen as intruders (Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). Evening meetings convene on school grounds rather than in community centers or parents' homes. Meeting agendas are set internally and reflect school officials' registered concerns and priorities. Letters go home to inform, rarely to solicit input or to generate sustained dialog. Telephone calls from school officials signal a serious problem, not a friendly inquiry.

These patterns of communication are lodged in an established social order that suggests that school personnel possess a certain body of knowledge and expertise. This social order is a product of human activity; that is, the social order defining family-school interactions comes into being as parents and school officials take action, interpret that action, and share with others their interpretations. Certain forms of action come to be associated with certain classes of actors (Berger & Luckman, 1967). For example, teachers contact parents; parents, as involuntary clients of the institution, respond as subordinate consumers or receptors of information. As one parent explained:

Sometimes at the meeting, I'm not really satisfied. Maybe if I went to a bunch of them I could voice my opinion. I used to go to a lot of my son's IEP meetings. I would be the only one in there who wouldn't have too much to say because the teacher, the principal, the psychologist, and whoever else would all be talking.

Many parents complained that their interactions with teachers were usually negative ones, focused on their children's misbehavior. Even then, there seemed to be a high degree of miscommunication. These exchanges and the language school officials often invoked seemed to foster and perpetuate feelings of distrust, distance, and disillusionment among parents. Consider the following perspectives:

[Relationships could be improved] by closer contact. Like when they're doing good, they could let you know. I didn't even know that [my granddaughter] didn't know her timetables. She would come home and say she didn't have any homework. Her teacher never sent a letter home telling me she wasn't doing it. So I didn't know.

I'd like to know when she's doing good, you know, and kind of reward her or something like that, other than just when she's doing badly.

Schools and parents need to communicate more. ... They have to listen to parents too. At conferences, they [teachers] may pretend to listen to parents but may not.

A parent of three who was studying to obtain her day care provider license said:

They ask you what do you feel about it. Just when you be getting good with talking about it, they cut you off. Say we don't have enough time, or we'll discuss it at the next meeting. At the next meeting, they discuss something else. When you call up there to talk to them about it, they don't have the time.

Mostly parent involvement is giving money because if you go up there and say a lot of things, then the teachers feel like you're trying to take over their jobs.

According to a Spanish-speaking father of three:

I would like an hour or so to sit down with the teacher so that I really could have an input and so that we could really talk. Right now, we only talk when the teacher feels it is important, and we only talk about what the teacher feels is important, not what I feel is important.

This was from a Pacific Islander father of four:

I didn't really like the way they write the letter to me because they are saying they are "inviting" me. If I'm part of the school, they are not inviting me. It means that we are coming from the outside to the school where our own children is going to.

We found little evidence to support the notion that low-income, minority parents feel intimidated in the presence of school officials. To be sure, there was a persistent and powerful spirit of deference paid to individuals credentialed and categorized as professionals. However, intimidation may be an inappropriate characterization that distorts the encompassing influence of status and legitimacy institutionalized in schools. Parents were much more likely to voice frustration than intimidation. In summary, parents felt somewhat comfortable stating their opinions but adhered to highly rationalized, scripted information flows. According to the mother studying for her child care licensure exam:

When you go to meetings, all you do is sit up and listen to the principal and the teacher talk. You really don't get to say what you want to say and how you feel about it. ... I'm not afraid of voicing my opinion. I used to feel like that when the kids was small, growing up. But, now, I tell them what I feel and it still don't get anywhere. I even thought about going to the head man and telling him what I thought about the school district, but then I was afraid that they might kick [my son] out, so I didn't do it.

Most of the parents blamed the school for strained relationships but directed the burden of resolution to families, teachers, and school administrators. Many suggested that if all parents would respond to existing opportunities for family-school interactions, things would be all right. Other parents argued for more comprehensive changes aimed at reducing distrust and disillusionment:

Okay, when you go to school for a school meeting, you feel like, it's uncomfortable. When you're sitting in a room with everybody around you, or sitting in a straight row—you're uncomfortable, and you can't really

say what you want to say. You feel tense, like the army or something. Make us feel that we're a part of something.

According to a father of four who worked in a manufacturing plant:

The key is, if you're related to somebody, but there is no fellowship, that relationship is going to come apart. A lot of people don't think that the parents are related to the school, but they are. In order to get this relationship stronger, they must build a fellowship—academic, social, whatever.

Patterns of family–school interactions seemed to be preset in a particular language, in a particular set of formal and informal exchanges, and in particular physical arrangements. They reflected certain assumptions about the status of families in social life and the role of educational systems in the public domain. These separate roles, or spheres, were legitimated through elaborate bureaucratic structures, policies, programs, and procedures.

### *Theoretical Underpinnings of Separation and Distance*

This picture of parent involvement reflects a familiar palette of limited interaction and unilateral decision making.<sup>3</sup> Low-income, minority par-

<sup>3</sup>Silence in regard to certain issues—what parents did not say—can inform the discussion about how parents, particularly those in low-income, minority communities, perceive the family–school relationship. Despite open-ended questions that may have invited comment, parents did not communicate concern with exogenous influences on children's schooling such as general economic conditions or racial discrimination. Anthropologist John Ogbu (1974, 1983, 1987) argued forcefully that "involuntary minorities" such as African and Mexican Americans perceive themselves as members of a caste who face insurmountable, socially and legally imposed barriers to economic and social advancement. Members of involuntary minorities believe that a good education is needed to get ahead. However, according to Ogbu (1987), these same members reject school rules, assessment methods, policies, and organizational norms because they reflect White-dominant culture.

This study validated Ogbu's contention that Blacks and Hispanics tend to voice support for public schooling as a vehicle for economic advancement, but it did not support his corresponding assertion that these individuals reject the idea that they have an equal chance with Whites. Nor was the expression of despair and disillusionment with the broader social order evidenced here. On the contrary, some parents welcomed the policies and practices of the school, remarking that decisions related to curriculum and the school schedule should be made by school officials. These findings may reflect a combination of factors, including the nature of our questions and the influence of our race (White) on responses; alternatively, it may be that this belief is not as prevalent nor as pervasive as Ogbu suggests. Further study might

ents themselves echoed what previous research has postulated: These parents value education and would like to be more involved, but their involvement is limited by a sense that their roles are distinct from those of schools. Just how and why do parents come to perceive that such a distinction is legitimate? A neo-Marxist perspective would suggest that relationships between low-income, minority parents and schools may mirror broader attempts to systematically deny resources, authority, and control to members of the lower class, who are in turn denied access to sources of power and influence: schooling and credentialing. A class-conflict analysis, however, may not fully explain the patterns we observed. Across town in the mostly White, upper-class community, for example, we may find that the relationship between school and parent is more similar to that of their cross-town neighbors than different. Future research might compare and contrast the factors that upper- and lower-class parents identify as influencing family-school relationships.

Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), in his work on cultural capital, linked class-conflict theory with the idea of institutionalization to explain varying levels of parent participation among different social classes. He suggested that schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of members of society by invoking particular linguistic styles, authority patterns, and types of curricula. The school curriculum, for example, tends to better reflect the skills required of the White-collar parent than of the parent employed as a pattern maker, garden hand, or kitchen worker. Recall the frustrations of the parents whose involvement was restricted due to their own limited schooling or skill set.

More recent research by Lareau (1989) similarly argued that a higher social class position provides parents with more resources to intervene in schooling. Such resources, garnered from their education, type of work experience, and social connections, bind families into tighter connections with social institutions than are available to working class families. Henry (1996) reiterated the contention that those with the time and resources to be involved are those invited to participate. In short, a neo-Marxist interpretation that suggests that a class conflict undergirds the structured asymmetry between family and school is incomplete without an equally compelling and complementary institutional framework.

consider the mediating influence of a minority-dominated school system on the beliefs and attitudes of minority (who are the majority) community members. Do they perceive the schools as agents of the dominant White class and culture and as having "sold out" to White influence? These are questions that exceed the aim of this study but deserve focused debate and reflection by educational anthropologists and sociologists.

Institutional theorists, though divided by field-specific interpretations, have suggested that organizations such as schools are embedded in complex environments to which organizations must mold and adapt to survive (Meyer & Scott, 1983). Organizations evolve to conform to and reflect institutionalized codes of behavior and conduct. Perhaps practices that attempt to involve parents into the domain of schooling have not been fully successful because they pose a threat to the inscribed assumption of educators as the “providers of knowledge and opportunity,” and parents as the “receivers.” The patterns of family–school interaction described herein reflect an institutionalized social order in which both actions and actors are typed. Parents feel, even in the context of parent-attracting policies and gimmicks, that their input and participation is not valued. Indeed, institutional theory suggests that schools may symbolically signal reform under the pressure of attitudinal shifts occurring in the external environment. Schools may not, however, intend to actualize the reforms. Goldring (1996), for example, argued that rhetoric and legislation surrounding teacher empowerment and site-based management that occur in response to socially constructed demands may be serving more as survival tools for the public school system than as reforms to change behavior. It may also be that the idea of parents in the classroom denies the image that both teachers and parents hold about what schools should be, and policies that seem to go against the notions of “real schools” are hard to sustain (Goldring, 1996; Metz, 1990).

Finally, just what constitutes appropriate parental involvement has yet to be institutionalized. It may be that although advocacy for parent involvement in the general sense has been high, the reason for its lack of success is a problem of consensus. Rapid adoption of new policies comes only when the ideas fit the normative and cognitive perceptions of multiple groups across communities and throughout the nation (Goldring, 1996). Perhaps the different definitions of appropriate parental behavior held between parents and between stakeholders are keeping parent involvement from being woven into the institutional environments of schools.

## Conclusion

All too often, school officials complain about apathetic parents who fail to get involved in the programs teachers and principals have worked diligently to plan and administer. All too often, school officials assume that parents are too lazy, incompetent, or preoccupied to participate in school programs. All too often, these enduring beliefs about parents limit com-



munication between the home and school to bitter confrontations about children's academic and behavioral problems.

In general, these feelings on the part of school staff seem to arise when participants fail to execute their prescribed role or social script. Replacing parent involvement with the idea of collaboration may be helpful in deconstructing the age-old scripts that delimit interaction today. Henry (1996) has begun to do just this with her feminist reinterpretation of parent-school relationships. By substituting the contemporary or "corporate" model in which "autonomy, separation, and distance" are valued with a more "democratic" one, she hopes to reframe the system of public education "toward more inclusive and interconnected relations that will benefit the learning potential of students" (Henry, 1996, p.20). Such a framework might be used to develop processes that diminish conflict and distance between families and schools and promote choice in the ways families can participate. Finally, the concept might render the term parent involvement itself incomplete, allowing an alternative to emerge whose language embodies a mutual, communal, and equitable exchange.

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