

Immigrant Parent Involvement in U.S. Schools:  
Current Practices and Future Possibilities

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Dedication

Para meu filho Elan.

## Abstract

This dissertation examines how parent involvement expectations are communicated and enacted in interactions at one small urban high school. Through detailed descriptions of school interactions between supporting staff and immigrant parents, this study examines how parent involvement expectations are understood and perceived. Although scholarly interest in parent involvement has existed for quite some time, few studies consider the role of supporting staff (e.g., family liaisons, testing coordinators, guidance counselors, social workers). In what ways do interactions with support staff impact constructs of parent involvement within a school? This approach provides a unique contribution to the current parent involvement literature. Through a year of ethnographic field research, I examine the experiences of school staff and parents as they interact in various spaces and engage in the process of parent involvement. Through participant observations in various parent group meetings, school events and activities, and shadowing of school staff, I explore parent involvement expectations at one small urban high school.

Although most of the current literature focuses on teacher-parent relationships, findings suggest that parent contact with teachers is extremely limited, and that it is actually supporting staff that engages most in interactions with parents. These staff play a key role in shaping parents' perceptions of involvement and become the main source for understanding the school's parent involvement expectations. Findings also present a new problem in the parent involvement paradigm, where new forms of involvement are being introduced without regard to parents' reality. As the data reveal, online access is now

expected as a form of involvement and for many families this is potentially an unrealistic expectation.

## Resumo

Esta dissertação examina como o envolvimento dos pais são comunicados e negociados nas interações rotineiras em uma pequena escola urbana de ensino médio. Através de descrições detalhadas das interações entre o pessoal de apoio da escola e pais imigrantes, o estudo analisa as expectativas de envolvimento dos pais são negociados e percebidos. Embora o interesse acadêmico no envolvimento dos pais já exista há algum tempo, poucos estudos consideram o papel da equipe de apoio (por exemplo, contatos familiares, coordenadores de testes, orientadores, assistentes sociais) neste envolvimento. De que forma as interações com o pessoal de apoio impactam a construção do envolvimento dos pais em uma escola? Esta abordagem fornece uma contribuição única para a literatura atual sobre o envolvimento escolar dos pais. Durante um ano de pesquisa etnográfica de campo foram examinadas as experiências da equipe escolar e dos pais, à medida que eles interagiam em vários espaços e se engajavam no processo de envolvimento dos pais. Através de observações e participações em diversas reuniões de grupos de pais e em eventos e atividades escolares, e também do acompanhamento do trabalho dos funcionários da escola, eu fui capaz de descobrir as expectativas de envolvimento dos pais em uma pequena escola urbana de ensino médio.

Embora a literatura atual concentre-se nas relações pais e professores, os resultados deste trabalho sugerem que o contato dos pais com os professores é extremamente limitado, e que, na verdade, é o pessoal de apoio (por exemplo, os conselheiros de orientação, contatos familiares, assistentes sociais) quem mais se envolve em interações com os pais. Estes funcionários tornam-se a fonte de entendimento das

expectativas de envolvimento dos pais e desempenham um papel fundamental na formação das percepções dos pais quanto a sua participação nas escolas. O acesso aos professores, consequentemente, tem um impacto significativo sobre as construções da ideologia de envolvimento dos pais. As descobertas deste trabalho também apresentam um problema novo no paradigma de envolvimento escolar dos pais, onde novas expectativas para o envolvimento estão sendo introduzidos sem levar em conta a realidade dos pais. Como os dados revelam, acesso on-line é agora esperado como uma forma de envolvimento dos pais, mas para muitas famílias esta é uma expectativa potencialmente irrealista.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In recent years, the United States educational system has received increased attention in the media and public discourse. Films like “Waiting for Superman” and “Wouldn’t Back Down” have openly challenged the current practices of schools, particularly the role of teachers and district policies. These films highlight the complex nature of the current educational system and the importance of parent involvement to mediate change. In both films parents were positioned as the only ones caring for the academic achievement of their children, and in “Wouldn’t Back Down” the parents took action against the school. In the film a group of parents fought through the bureaucracy of the educational board and were able to take over a school, firing union teachers and redesigning the school curriculum and teaching approach to fit the needs of the student population. The film’s message is clear; parent involvement can be transformative. Long thought of as a key factor in successful student outcomes, parental involvement has received considerable attention in educational research in the last decade (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007). The focus of scholarly discussions on parent involvement is primarily on its relationship to student achievement. This focus has a significant influence on what researchers have chosen to investigate. By and large, studies on parental involvement have focused on three main topics:

1. Teacher and parent perceptions of what “counts” as involvement. Studies in this area have uncovered an apparent mismatch between teacher and

parent perceptions of their roles in schools. Many studies (e.g., Dyson, 2001; Lareau, 2000; Valdés, 1996; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001) highlight how the mismatch of teacher and parent expectations results in lower parental involvement among particular minoritized groups (i.e., Latinos, African Americans, immigrants, working-class families);

2. Impact of parental involvement on student achievement. These studies have focused on descriptions of particular types of parent behavior that have the greatest impact on student achievement (e.g., Aronson, 1996; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ibanez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004; Tracy, 1995).
3. Challenges and barriers to parental involvement. Studies in this area have presented a significant amount of descriptive information on particular barriers and have provided a variety of recommendations for future engagement (e.g., Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Kim, 2009; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Although studies on these topics report valued discoveries on the role of parent involvement, they limit investigations to the parent–teacher dyad. This potentially results on the oversight of other factors that impact parent involvement, such as interactions with other school staff (e.g., social workers, family liaisons, and guidance counselors). Furthermore, current studies rely heavily on social and cultural capital as instruments of analysis (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Lareau, 2000; Martinez-Cosio &

Iannacone, 2007; Monkman, Ronald, & Theramene, 2005; Ngo, 2006; Olneck, 2000; Valdés, 1996; Zhou & Bankston III, 1994). Social capital relates to the social networks and relationships gained, created, or possessed by an individual; whereas, cultural capital relates to embodied knowledge such as a set of characteristics and behaviors (i.e., educational qualifications, family name, and access to high culture). Both forms of capital can be used as beneficial resources in schools. Studies that utilize Bourdieu's (1986) framework to analyze parental involvement focus on capital as a "commodity" that is used to negotiate a valued space within the U.S. school system (Lareau, 2000; Valdés, 1996). In other words, students who possess capital gain greater access to school resources and thus are guaranteed an increased chance for academic success. Therefore, parents are at a disadvantage when they lack the recognized "school capital" to pass on to their children. This includes having the necessary skills to decode the variety of information and expectations in the school setting (i.e., attending parent–teacher conferences). However, few studies investigate the specific experiences of immigrant families as they attempt to engage in the process of *interacting* with school. The Child Trends Data Bank reports that "one in five school-aged children is foreign born or the child of a foreign-born parent, and between 1990 and 2010, children of immigrants are expected to account for more than half of the growth in the school-aged population." With this changing demographic among K–12 students, comes the need for new priorities, as well as new skills for educators, and school administrators. Schools may need to reflect on their current practices and assess how these are suited to meet the needs of their new student population.

In addition, most investigations of parent involvement are based on the elementary school context, where scholars report that parents are more likely to visit classrooms and interact with teachers. These teacher interactions potentially provide parents the opportunity to access the school capital and enhance the visibility of their involvement. However, Hill and Taylor (2004) report that in the middle school and high school context parent involvement still plays a key role in student achievement. In fact, some studies report that the middle and high school model that includes more teachers and a complex bureaucratic system can be more challenging for parents to navigate (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Some immigrant parents entering the school system at middle and high school stages may potentially lack the experience with parent involvement typically acquired during the elementary school years. In this dissertation, I examine how parent involvement codes are constructed and negotiated during interactions in a small urban high school. Understanding parent involvement in the high school context becomes important when we consider the forms of engagement expected of parents, typically reported as attending school activities and events (Seginer, 2006). Attendance at school events potentially does not provide the same access to school capital as in the elementary school model, which includes more classroom presence and interactions with teachers. In high school, parents may have less contact with teachers, and rely solely on school events to build their understanding of parent involvement. School events, which typically include parents such as college information night, may lack opportunity for parents to gain meaningful one-on-one interactions with teachers. Furthermore, studies that focus on the elementary school context fail to consider the increased role of other school staff

during the high school experience. Social workers, guidance counselors, and family liaisons, for example, may have more contact with parents at high school events and potentially can have important roles in shaping constructs of parent involvement. Therefore, through detailed descriptions of school interactions between supporting staff and immigrant parents, I consider how parent involvement expectations are negotiated and perceived. Although scholarly interest in parent involvement has existed for quite some time, few studies consider the role of supporting staff (e.g., family liaisons, testing coordinators, guidance counselors, and social workers). In what ways do interactions with support staff impact constructs of parent involvement within a school? To address the need described here, I selected a small urban school to focus on how parent involvement is understood by immigrant families. This approach provides a unique contribution to the current understanding of the impact of parent involvement in student academic success.

My dissertation investigates the ways in which parents and supporting staff interact in school spaces. Past scholars have made significant contributions to the field by reporting on parent involvement barriers and challenges. They have identified and detailed beliefs, expectations, perceptions and misunderstandings by both parents and schools when they engage in home–school partnerships. My work builds on this past scholarship by exploring the processes immigrant parents undergo as they engage with the U.S. school system. To explore this process, this study will consider the following research questions:

1. How do schools provide spaces for parent engagement? How do interactions in these key spaces impact staff and parent perceptions of parent involvement?
2. How do beliefs, expectations, and perceptions of parent involvement play out in interactions at a small urban high school?

To answer these questions, I draw on a year of fieldwork at Community High. I examine the experiences of school staff and parents as they interact in various spaces and engage in the process of parent involvement. Through participant observations in various parent group meetings, school events and activities, and shadowing of school staff, I explore parent involvement at Community High.

This dissertation fills a significant gap in the literature that traditionally has ignored how staff beliefs about parent involvement impact parent perceptions and engagement with schools. In Chapter 2, I detail the current issues in parent involvement discussions. I identify prominent findings, and existing gaps in the research. I also present the theoretical frame for this study. I use Bourdieu's (1986) social and cultural capital theory to build the foundation for this current work. In Chapter 3, I present the ethnographic research method for this dissertation. I explain how ethnographic tools were used as part of the research design and data collection process. I describe the context of the school and community where this study took place, and the data collection and analysis procedures. I also explore my identity as a researcher and participant observer at the school. In Chapter 4, I share the main findings from the study. I begin with a detailed description of school spaces that welcomed parent participation and the types of

interactions present in these spaces. I illustrate the interactions that shaped constructs of parent involvement in this urban school. I then discuss how the findings illuminate our understanding of home–school engagement as a complex process, and particularly how school interactions impact perceptions of parent involvement. I also discuss how parent involvement efforts become problematic when they are implemented through parent education programs rather than meaningful engagement. In Chapter 5, I explicate new ways in which schools expect parents to be involved and present, and how these may further marginalize immigrant families. Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the implications of this dissertation. I present the limitations of the study and provide final thoughts on ways in which schools can become spaces for more meaningful home–school partnerships.

## Chapter 2

### Looking Back: The Roots of Parent Involvement

This chapter will provide a theoretical frame to understand parent involvement at Community High, the focal school for this dissertation. The cornerstone of the theoretical frame for this study is Bourdieu's (1986) constructs of social and cultural capital used to frame and understand parental involvement. Social and cultural capital provides a foundation for understanding current issues of immigrant parent involvement. The theoretical constructs of social and cultural capital have been used to explicate immigrant parent experiences in U.S. schools, and will also highlight a space where the current study contributes to the growing and important field of immigrant education.

Additionally, this chapter will synthesize the major trends in research on parental involvement research and how its focus has evolved over time. It will review and critique major studies in the area of parental involvement and illustrate how they shape dominant perceptions of parent-teacher interactions as well as home-school relationships.

### Theoretical Frame

It has been 50 years since the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduced social and cultural capital as instruments of analysis in the field of sociology. Through his extensive work in French schools, Bourdieu (1986) gave evidence that schools reproduce existing social inequalities. Departing from the concept of capital as the “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its “incorporated,” embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (p. 46). Bourdieu

(1986) introduced social and cultural capital as instruments of analysis for explaining the experiences of French students. According to this approach, schools possess their own set of social and cultural capital that are legitimized and reproduced and which in turn require students to “activate” in order to achieve school success. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explain that schools do not necessarily create this capital, but in fact reproduce this capital thereby mirroring existing inequalities in society. In essence, this means students’ success or failure is dependent on their individual (or family) ability to accumulate, embody, and transmit the forms of capital recognized in both society and schools. Bourdieu (1993) also suggests that certain individuals possess the skills to properly decipher codes that are encoded within the producers cultural works. Although Bourdieu presents the idea of code in his analysis of the understanding of art, explaining how some individuals are unconsciously capable of deciphering the cultural codes to experience art, this approach can also be applied to the understanding of parent involvement expectations. For example, parents’ ability to decipher the school’s parent involvement codes, such as the expectation that parents attend parent–teacher conferences, rests on parent’s ability to both recognize and decipher these school codes.

In the context of French society, Bourdieu elaborated a descriptive analysis of what counts as social and cultural capital. Cultural capital is a set of characteristics and behaviors (i.e., educational qualifications, family name, access to high culture), and social capital being connections to networks and groups that make accumulation, embodiment and transmission possible. Recognizing and describing this capital was a significant theoretical contribution and has served as a foundation for numerous studies in

education and in other fields (i.e., politics, economics). Bourdieu questioned the notion that schools are neutral spaces where everyone has an equal chance of success.

Since the emergence of Bourdieu's theory of capital, countless studies in the field of educational research have utilized his ideas to explore how schooling reproduces societal power structures. These studies have uncovered important institutional practices that contribute to the inequalities of the school experience for diverse students (Lareau, 2000; Ogbu, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Zhou & Bankston III, 1994). Studies have also highlighted teacher practices (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987), institutional practices (Blackledge, 2001), and parents' beliefs (Dyson, 2001) that according to Bourdieu (1986) legitimize the authority of schools and in many cases result in, what he terms, the *redouble* of existing social inequalities (p. 109).

Several definitions of social and cultural capital have emerged in educational research; most notable have been the contributions of Jean-Claude Passeron (1986), Paul DiMaggio (1982), James Coleman (1988), and Alejandro Portes (1998). These researchers have essentially set the dominant interpretation of social and cultural capital in the field of educational research. Passeron, closely allied with Bourdieu's (1986) original concept (and in many cases working directly with him), focused on the "model of reproduction" in schools, stating that such a model is nothing more than a "conceptual framework in which a whole series of reproductive processes can be observed with great regularity in the operation of school system" (p. 621). Passeron suggests student success is not based solely on individual ability or effort, but in fact on a series of acquired capital. This framework essentially presents an analysis of schooling as an institution

where student outcome is predetermined on one's ability to acquire and embody the "right" social and cultural capital.

Expanding on this idea of having the "right" capital, DiMaggio (1982) presents a descriptive model of cultural capital as a prerequisite for school success. Through his work DiMaggio describes cultural capital as a set of specific characteristics and behaviors students can, or should, acquire in order to have positive outcomes in school. DiMaggio moves beyond Bourdieu's (1986) initial approach of cultural capital as primarily transmitted within families and presents an active process of attaining cultural capital. In essence his model implies that students without the cultural capital recognized by schools can attain it by strategically participating and seeking out participation in high status culture activities to achieve desired goals of upward mobility (p. 190). This approach suggests that cultural capital can be a sort of checklist students can acquire via participation. However, what is missing from DiMaggio's model is a discussion on access. How will students gain access to opportunities to participate in activities that will afford them the "right" cultural capital? This discussion is what Coleman (1988) explores in his concept of social capital and its interaction with the acquisition of cultural capital. Coleman writes:

social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. (p. 98)

By approaching social capital as a resource, utilized by certain individuals to obtain specific outcomes, Coleman (1988) positions social capital as an instrument. Therefore, individuals, families, and communities can effectively tap into different social relations to gain what is needed for success.

Taking a critical view to Coleman (1988), Portes (2000) advised caution in an approach that predicts school success primarily by individual acquisition of social capital. He argued “what really counts, in the end, is the social and economic status (SES) of the family, [and for immigrant families] the children’s ability in English, and their length of residence in the country” (p. 9). Portes highlighted that SES impacts how individuals and families gain access to the necessary school capital. What is significant from Portes’s discussion of social capital is the need to contextualize these instruments of analysis in research rather than using generalized descriptions. In particular, he pointed to a greater need to explicate the historical and contextual situations of families, particularly immigrant families. As he explained, the reception of different immigrant groups in the United States, if they were persecuted or not, shapes how such groups are perceived and treated in both social and school settings (Portes, 2000, p. 10). Consequently, the benefits of strong social capital may be limited due to their dependence on these broader structural forces.

### **Social and Cultural Capital in Parental Involvement Research**

Numerous studies have utilized social and cultural capital as the framework to investigate the experiences and outcomes of diverse students in the U.S. educational system (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Dyson, 2001; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Lareau, 2000; Martinez-

Cosio & Iannacone, 2007; Monkman et al., 2005; Ngo, 2006; Olneck, 2000; Valdés, 1996). Most notable has been the work of Annette Lareau (2000) on social class and parental involvement in elementary education. In her work, she redefined cultural capital in the context of U.S. schools by taking a comparative approach to parent involvement in schools among upper-middle class and working-class communities. Essentially, Lareau's work problematized the idea that social and cultural capital is a passive undertaking and highlights how families strategically activate resources for the benefit of their children. Moving away from Hoover-Demsey et al.'s (1987) assumption that families in upper middle classes realize the importance of education and working-class families do not, Lareau (2000) introduced evidence of a more complex explanation. Her findings indicated that both groups of parents recognize the importance of education; the difference lies in their access to resources that transform acquired social capital into beneficial outcomes for their children. Access is directly connected with SES. Given the funding structure of U.S. schools, which by and large are funded by local property taxes, SES significantly contributes to students' access to high quality schools and teachers (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Research shows that low-SES children start school with lower achievement rates. For example, data suggest that high-SES children entering kindergarten have scores 60% higher than low-SES children, and will continue to achieve at higher rates throughout their schooling (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Lareau's (2000) detailed study of 2 schools—1 in an upper middle class neighborhood and 1 in a working class neighborhood—revealed ways in which SES impacts families' access to school and relationships with school staff.

Using an ethnographic research approach, Lareau (2000) observed and documented the daily lives of parents and their interactions with schools in two different communities. The Colton School serves a working class community where most of the parents work in semiskilled or unskilled occupations. In contrast, the Prescott School serves an upper-middle class community where most of the parents work in professional occupations (i.e., doctors, lawyers, engineers). Lareau found that Colton School parents perceived the home and school as two separate environments. They expressed their value of education by, among other things, trusting teachers, having their children at school on time and making sure homework was complete. Parents made few demands on teachers, and viewed teachers as experts. In contrast, Prescott School parents perceived an “interconnectedness between family life and educational institutions” (p. 169), which resulted in active intervention as the primary form of expression of the value of education. These parents often made demands on teachers, and viewed teachers and schools as employees. They supervised teachers and intervened by demanding customized curriculum changes when their children were struggling. Ironically, as Lareau points out, teachers perceived the Colton School parents’ behavior as unsupportive. Although these parents showed more respect and trust in the expertise of teachers, they did not fulfill teacher expectations of legitimized parental involvement practices in school. In contrast, Prescott School parents perceived teachers as “employees” or equals, and by in large, failed to recognize them as experts. However, their behavior was in line with teacher expectations of parental involvement practices and thus was perceived as supportive of their children’s success in school. The pattern that Lareau was able to

identify is that parents' SES is a key factor in their ability to access resources (e.g., information), and activate these resources for the benefit of their children (i.e., hire tutors, make demands on teachers). Her study suggests "that the key elements of class cultures become forms of cultural capital because they give parents a pool of resources which they can activate" (p. 177), and therefore "these findings support the importance of rethinking the concept of cultural capital and, in particular, of clarifying the stages by and through which resources are activated" (p. 179). For Lareau, parents' ability to activate either cultural or social capital was dependent on their socioeconomic status. Her study provides insight in our understanding of how social and cultural capital mediates educational experiences and ways in which schools rather than students control outcomes. However, her lack of attention to student ethnicity is a significant gap. Students participating in the study were mostly white, and even though one third of students at Colton were Hispanic, Lareau<sup>1</sup> failed to explore how SES and ethnicity interact in their relationship with schools. SES is strongly associated with race and ethnicity. "For example, 34% of black children and 29% of Hispanic are in the lowest quintile of SES compared with only 9% of white children" (Lee & Burkam, 2002, p. 2). Some scholars have suggested that low SES and ethnicity both impact school relationships.

In her study, Valdés (1996) explored how newly arrived Mexican immigrant families learn about and experience school. In her study, 10 Mexican-origin immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> Lareau first published *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (1989) in 1989. It was later republished in 2000 with updates. Therefore, the 1st edition was published in 1989 before Valdés, and the 2nd edition after in 2000. Most scholars today reference Lareau 2nd edition.

families were observed over a 3-year period. Findings revealed that the struggles these families faced were centered on two factors: their low socioeconomic status and their cultural identity as Mexican immigrants. These two factors had an enormous impact on the parents' understanding of U.S. schools and how to meet school expectations of supporting their children. Parents in the study had difficulty making sense of everyday school operations and rules, such as, rules for bathroom break during class, staying after school, communicating with teachers (i.e., written notes or messages), and reading report cards. This lack of understanding caused resentment from both the teachers and the parents and had several consequences on the academic achievement of the families' children. For example, Valdés reported that in a few cases, teachers held students back without a clear explanation. Although parents wanted to intervene to advocate for their children, they did not know how or even that they could intervene. This showed that the socioeconomic and educational background of families (most parents had little to no formal education background), and also cultural background (belief that teachers know best), had a significant impact on parents' ability to support their children as expected by U.S. schools.

What is significant about this study is that Valdés also highlighted the unique challenges of Mexican families that were rooted in their cultural traditions and practices. The families' misunderstanding of school operations, belief in the purpose of education and the role of schools and teachers within their community were not only connected to their SES, but in fact their ethnic identity and background. For example, the term *educación* in Spanish "has a much broader meaning [than education in English] and

includes both manners and moral values” (p. 125); therefore, education for these Mexican families “included teaching children how to behave, how to act around others, and also what was good and what was moral” (p. 125). Families expected schools and teachers to be part of this educational process (see Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg [1995] for more on the concept of *educación* in Latino families). The argument here is that the lack of social and cultural capital is not only rooted in SES, but also in ethnic and cultural background that shape families’ perceptions of their role as parents and the role of teachers and schools. Expanding on Lareau’s research (1989/2000), Valdés presents a unique approach to social and cultural capital as a framework for analysis, by adding the lens of ethnicity and how that mediates the educational experiences and outcomes of immigrant students. Valdés (1996) emphasizes the role of SES and how it impacts families’ everyday lives; she also provides a new direction for future studies, which includes culture.

Few studies have attempted to present a clear distinction between SES and ethnicity in research utilizing a social and cultural capital framework to explore parental involvement and student outcomes in schools (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Dyson, 2001; Ogbu, 2003; Zhou & Lin, 2005). Noteworthy is Dyson’s (2001) extensive study of Chinese immigrant parents in Canada. By controlling the SES (selecting participants with middle to upper socioeconomic status and considerable educational background), Dyson highlighted how ethnicity (including cultural identity) still presents barriers to meaningful parental involvement in schools. Results showed that “immigrant parents communicated less frequently [with schools], had more difficulty comprehending the communication,

and were less satisfied with the communication” (p. 4). For example, parents in the study expected teachers to identify “academic” problems students were having in schools, and focus communication on curriculum discussion. However, the school and teacher focused communication on what parents perceived as superficial issues. Dyson’s study showed that even though parents were middle class and had strong educational background, they did not share the cultural capital recognized by schools. Therefore, they were mostly unsuccessful with their attempts to activate existing social and cultural capital for the benefit of their children. Chinese parents expressed a different understanding of the purpose of school and the roles of teachers and parents in the education of children. Although Dyson’s study did not include a descriptive focus on the academic performance of these Chinese students, there is evidence from other studies (Lagana, 2004; Perreira et al., 2006) that they would have benefited from more parent involvement and greater understanding of the school system. What is clear from these findings is that the mismatch between the legitimized capital of schools and immigrant families’ capital impedes immigrant students to reach their full potential as students and take advantage of the diverse opportunities available in schools. The Chinese parents in essence were powerless within the school setting even though they had much of the capital schools recognized (i.e., years of formal education).

It is also important to consider that these findings do not necessarily suggest that immigrant families need to “assimilate” to the capital of schools to be successful, but rather learn to utilize their existing capital as resources within the context of schools. As Zhou and Bankston III’s (1994) study on Vietnamese youth in New Orleans indicates,

“strong positive immigrant cultural orientations can serve as a form of social capital that promotes value conformity and constructive forms of behavior, which provide otherwise disadvantaged children with an adaptive advantage” (p. 821). What Zhou and Bankston III have suggested is that the use of social capital as instruments of analysis for school outcomes should focus more on community connections and how these empower individuals to advocate for themselves. This approach is more in line with the use of social capital in the field of political science (see Putman, 1993), which highlights the power of communities to shift recognized forms of capital. Rather than predicting student failure by way of analyzing existing inequalities in schools, Zhou and Bankston III (1994) identified the strength of community standards that promote strong social capital and have the ability to position ethnicity as a resource. Therefore, social integration within an ethnic community can be conceptualized as providing social capital (p. 843). Zhou and Bankston III’s contribution to the debate of how social and cultural capital mediate educational experiences and outcomes focused on ways in which ethnic communities can be empowered to recognize existing community capital and “activate” it to benefit members. This process may be undertaken differently depending on context (i.e., middle-class suburbs [or ethnic enclaves] and urban centers).

These studies reveal that social and cultural capital is an important instrument of analysis that serves to unveil the reality of school inequalities. Through definitions of social capital as the connections or networks within families, and more broadly within communities, researchers have documented the vast resources members can access and activate for the benefit of students. In addition, acquired cultural capital provides students

with an important “commodity” that can be “traded” in school settings for greater opportunities. As a consequence, some students are disadvantaged compared to others. There is evidence that SES and ethnicity play a role in the ability to access, transmit and embody the required capital of schools. Furthermore, these studies fail to detail the role of particular school agents in transmitting the capital of schools—for example, how different staff members like teachers, family liaisons or guidance counselors communicate expectations and consequently how they construct or reinforce inequalities within the school. In what ways do interactions with particular staff members have an increased impact in parents’ access to the school capital? Does the context or amount of interaction with different staff members impact perceived constructs of involvement or schooling?

Careful review of this body of work suggests that, by and large, studies focus on the parent–teacher dyad to report on the access to social and cultural capital. At Community High, however, the school supporting staff played a significant role in constructs of parent involvement and opportunities for access to the school capital. What remains to be discovered is how interactions with supporting staff impact parent involvement and consequently access to the school capital. As presented earlier, teacher interactions decrease at the high school level given the context of multiple teachers, so we are left wondering how the potentially limited access to teachers impacts the recognition of involvement? This study fills this gap by focusing on interactions between supporting staff and parents, and exploring how these interactions impact the understanding of parent involvement and access to school capital.

In summary, by drawing on social and cultural capital as theoretical frame, this study will explore how parental involvement is both recognized and constructed in school interactions. Social and cultural capital will provide a lens in which parental involvement expectations can be recognized. This frame will allow me to approach parental involvement critically and as a fluid concept, where particular values exist, are transmitted, and constantly evolve.

### **Current Definitions of Parental Involvement**

Teachers tend to view parental involvement as: attending parent–teacher conferences, being present during school sponsored events, helping with homework, and reading with their children at home (Carreón et al., 2005; Lareau, 2000; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Valdés, 1996); being available to teachers (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005); reading and understanding materials schools send home, such as notes and grade reports (Ramirez, 2003); assistance with class selection (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008); participating in fundraisers (Dyson, 2001), and proficiency in English (Blackledge, 2001). According to Lareau (2000), these expectations not only shaped teachers' definitions of parental involvement, they also served to label parents lacking these characteristics as deficient or unsupportive of their child's school success. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of parental involvement are focused and limited to behaviors, such as what parents should be doing rather than what they believe or express to their children about education. In contrast, studies have shown that parents define parental involvement more broadly and focus more on expressing their beliefs and values on education as supportive of their children (Dyson, 2001; López, Scribner, &

Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Valdés, 1996). For example, Mexican parents in Valdés's (1996) study viewed getting their children to school on time and respect for teacher expertise as supportive of their children's education. Valdés (1996) also found that parents expected that teachers participate in the development of children's moral values. Similarly, Dyson's (2001) study of Chinese immigrant families in Canada also found that parents expected teachers to also teach their children social skills and discipline when necessary. In both of these studies, parents believed that school partnership involved fostering and advancing home values and morals. Thus, supportive behavior and parental involvement for these parents was defined as fostering good values and morals at home.

Furthermore, present research seems to reproduce existing definitions of parental involvement rather than upset its construct. Rather than questioning definitions or roles, researchers have focused on *how* teachers and parents perceive their roles within the existing framework of teacher–parent relationships. In addition, studies have also identified *what* causes some parents to be more involved compared to others (Lareau, 2000), and consequently how students are affected. However, few studies have asked *how* current parental involvement expectations are constructed, communicated, and enacted within schools.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Parental Involvement**

Although some articles in peer reviewed journals have addressed challenges and barriers to parent involvement (Carreón et al., 2005; Kim, 2009; Perreira et al., 2006; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Turney & Kao, 2009), the majority of information on this issue comes from, what academics call “grey literature” (i.e., unpublished reports and policy

briefings). These documents offer a variety of information to assist policy makers and school districts in implementing parental involvement programs, particularly with marginalized communities. Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) from the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice provide a policy brief that details the major factors that impact effective parental involvement with English learners. Based on literature review in the area, Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) recognize five barriers to successful parental involvement:

1. school-based barriers—schools' reproduction of the deficit model when dealing with diverse populations, viewing them as lacking resources and interest in education;
2. lack of English language proficiency—the English-only system used by many schools can feel unwelcoming to parents with low English language proficiency;
3. parental educational level—many ELL parents lack experience with U.S. schools and have limited schooling;
4. differences between school culture and home culture—differences in school personnel's and parents' perceptions and expectations of roles they should play in the education of children; and
5. logistical issues—parents' limited resources for transportation and time off work.

These barriers are supported by other reports (Barauski et al., 2003) and studies (Kim, 2009; Peterson & Ladky, 2007), and highlight important considerations when

developing and implementing parental involvement programs with diverse populations (pp. 8–10). Some studies have also considered additional barriers that impact parental involvement, such as Fine’s (1993) analysis of power (i.e., ideological power, material power), Lareau’s (2000) comparative analysis of SES factors in home–school relationships, between working-class and upper-middle class communities, and Turney and Kao’s (2009) analysis of race and immigration status. Furthermore, most of the literature in this category aims to provide recommendations or models for parent involvement programs within the existing framework of school–family partnership, which some would claim reproduce social inequalities (Lareau, 2000). Although these studies provide a significant contribution to educators, they do little to question or upset existing beliefs and ideologies that establish barriers in the first place.

Furthermore, studies on this topic rely heavily on elaborate models of effective parental involvement programs to both identify barriers and provide recommendations. Perhaps the most widely used model of parent involvement programs is based on Epstein’s framework of six types of involvement:

1. *Parenting*: help families establish home environments to support children as students;
2. *Communicating*: design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children’s progress;
3. *Volunteering*: recruit and organize parents’ help and support;

4. *Learning at home*: provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning;
5. *Decision making*: include parents in school decisions, and develop parent leaders and representatives; and
6. *Collaborating with community*: identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Epstein's framework was based on the results of her study on parental involvement in the Maryland school districts. Through a series of surveys with teachers, principals, and parents, and in-depth interviews with some teachers, Epstein created a working model schools should follow to implement and practice successful partnerships between parents and teachers, and between the home, community, and schools. Although her work advanced the importance of parental involvement as a key factor in student achievement, it also positioned schools to be in control of interactions. As evident in her framework, schools control the forms and means of interactions, and dictate expectations, because they are placed in control of the relationship. Although quantitative studies such as this provide rich data, they do not account for the context or lived experience of families, particularly of diverse populations. Nonetheless, most of the research in the area of parental involvement has replicated this approach, with few exceptions (e.g., Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), and consequently limited the types of parental involvement programs and research.

## **Connecting Parental Involvement and Student Achievement**

Overall, research suggests that parental involvement has positive effects on student achievement (Aronson, 1996; Christenson et al., 1992; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Tracy, 1995). Some studies in this area have focused on measuring what types of parental involvement have the greatest impact on student achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ingram et al., 2007); and on associations between parental involvement and higher student motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Ibanez et al., 2004). Hill and Tyson's (2009) meta-analysis of 50 studies on parental involvement in middle school confirmed a positive impact between parental involvement and student achievement. In addition, this study reported that the strength of the association was based on the type of parental involvement. Academic socialization defined as "parents' communication of their expectations for achievement and value for education, fostering educational and occupational aspirations in their adolescents, discussing learning strategies with children and making preparations and plans for the future" (p. 758) had the strongest positive relationship with middle school student achievement. In contrast, "involvement that entailed assisting with homework was not consistently associated with achievement" (p. 758). Findings related to parents helping with homework as inconsequential to higher student achievement is also supported by other studies. For example, Cooper (2007) found parent homework help, in some contexts, to even potentially interfere with student achievement. Furthermore, Henderson and Mapp (2002) also found that communicating with schools, volunteering, and attending school events, long thought of as improving student achievement, in fact have virtually no impact. Ironically, as presented earlier in

this paper, teachers perceive all these (e.g., homework help, volunteering, attending school events) as evidence of parental support and interest in student achievement, even though empirical research shows their effect is questionable at best. In contrast, academic socialization, which is “dependent on parents’ knowledge about how to navigate the middle school context” (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 759), is left out of teachers’ interpretations of their roles in parent–teacher interactions. The “how to” aspect of the schooling process is a tool teachers assume parents already have by virtue of having been students themselves. This assumed knowledge of the schooling process leaves a large group of families at a great disadvantage, particularly immigrant families schooled in different systems and families with no formal educational background.

Another area of focus in parental involvement and its impact on student achievement is related to student motivation. Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005) did a thorough review of studies related to parental involvement and motivation. The 13 studies selected for review showed evidence that parental involvement is associated with increasing students’ motivation. According to the findings, “when parents are involved, students report more effort, concentration, and attention. Students are more inherently interested in learning, and their experience higher perceived competence...Students whose parents are involved are more likely to take personal responsibility for their learning” (p. 117). Another point worth noting is the quantitative approach used in all the studies in this area (Crosnoe, 2009; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ibanez et al., 2004; Ingram et al., 2007), which indicates an epistemological limitation. Although quantitative studies provide a link

between parental involvement and higher student scores, they fails to give educators a more holistic, personalized, or nuanced picture of how parental involvement benefits students in other areas of the school experience (i.e., desire to learn, respect for teachers). Evidence of the impact of parent involvement can also be seen in program evaluation research. These studies typically examine school programs targeting parents within the school context and how successful they are in increasing parent engagement in schools.

### **Evaluation of Parental Involvement Programs**

Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar (2002) provides a synthesized review of studies that evaluated the effectiveness of K–12 parent involvement programs. Their study reviewed the results of different programs by looking at the theoretical foundations, target populations and types of interventions provided, and the reported program outcomes. In essence, their work is an evaluation of evaluation studies. This article gathered information from a total of 39 articles that evaluated 41 programs and argues that there is “little empirical support for the widespread claim that parent involvement programs are an effective means of improving student achievement or changing parent, teacher, and student behavior” (p. 549). However, this quantitative methods study does not necessarily disprove the effectiveness of a relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, but in fact highlights a shocking amount of flaws in evaluation research in this area, which rely mainly on covariance structural models to measure student achievement. For example, Mattingly et al. (2002) report that from the articles reviewed, 51% did not report the race and ethnicity of participants, 86% failed to report education level of parents (p. 553–554), and only two articles account for

the socioeconomic status of families (p. 564). In addition, the researchers found that the majority of programs (73%) failed to identify a theoretical framework in their design (p. 564). Another troubling finding was that the majority of studies focused on “changing parent behavior—especially in the areas of parenting and supporting home learning—rather than on changing teacher practices or school structures” (p. 565). Although the authors argue that the numerous flaws in parental involvement program designs and evaluations, should negate its benefits to student achievement; the fact remains that parental involvement does impact student outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Therefore, what this article actually accomplishes is to recognize the need for a more diverse and creative approach to implement and evaluate programs, particularly in minoritized communities. As Mattingly et al. (2002) exemplify,

Despite the persuasive evidence showing that socioeconomic status, race, immigration status, and family structure are strong correlates of parent involvement, few studies have analyzed interactions among program interventions and these family characteristics. The failure to take family characteristics into account is troublesome, given that the rationale for many programs is the improvement of conditions for “at-risk” students. (p. 571)

As Mattingly et al. (2002) suggests parent involvement programs will continue to have negative outcomes if they fail to consider the background of families they serve during the planning and implementation process. Schools cannot deny the impact of families’ socioeconomic status, race, immigration status and structure when initiating parent involvement program because these are the mediating factors that determine the success or failure of such programs. Furthermore, a major purpose of parental involvement programs is to increase parent–teacher collaboration and mutual

understanding on how they can best assist students in their learning (Gonzalez et al., 1995). As detailed earlier, most studies show that parental involvement programs tend to focus on changing parent behavior rather than on school and teacher change (Mattingly et al., 2002). Nevertheless, schools continue to focus on families as the target for change, rather than educating their staff on ways in which the community can become resources for positive change within the school. In fact, Edwards and Warin's (1999) study on primary schools suggests "schools felt that differences between home and school could be overcome if parents could be taught to assume the values of the school" (p. 337). This approach to parent involvement is problematic for two reasons: First, it views parents as deficient and therefore reinforces the deficit model (Orozco, 2008; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001), and second, it legitimizes the school as having the preferred set of values and in turn allows them to reinforce social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

### **Developing Meaningful Parental Involvement with Diverse Families**

Recognizing what families already do to promote learning and developing school transferable skills is usually left out of the analysis of school–family partnerships. Schools' failure to recognize immigrant parents' *funds of knowledge* results in their inability to value and incorporate these resources in a meaningful way in the school curriculum. Compton-Lilly (2007), for example, explains that when it comes to reading ability and skills students are measured by teacher perceptions of what counts as reading, these measurements are often times based on recognized and legitimized practices,

[i]n the reading classroom, students whose words, mannerisms, and gestures fulfill school ideals possess embodied reading capital. Students who exhibit embodied reading capital display an allegiance to school-sanctioned reading norms through their display of embodied reading

capital. Examples include children who read the right books, participate in reading in ways that are acceptable at school (e.g., reading as a solitary activity accompanied by workbook exercises and skill practice), follow school norms for reading behavior (e.g., sitting in a desk, reading silently, decoding words), and say the right things about reading (e.g., “I love to read.”; p. 77)

Unfortunately, some of the rich reading practices of minoritized groups go unnoticed in U.S. schools. For example, in Muslim cultures young children may learn the value of reading at an early age through reading the Koran. However, this reading practice looks very different: children read in groups, seated on the floor, rocking back and forth for concentration. They also read, in many cases, in a second language since the Koran is written and read in Arabic. In these communities, children learn to read the words, and are encouraged to memorize the text. So children can recite the Koran, but will likely not be able to answer workbook questions on content meaning. As Moore (2006) explains, in many cultures and religions, “the memorization and recitation of sacred texts are valued as acts of piety, discipline, and cultural preservation, whether or not the individual grasps their literal meaning” (p. 110). Reading the Koran is viewed as a prized skill in Muslim communities; however, unlike in the U.S. curriculum, the action and practice of reading is valued over the understanding of the text. These communities maintain a tradition of rote learning, where repetition and memorization are used as learning strategies in education (Moore, 2006). Unlike the Western educational system, which has now largely rejected rote learning and embraced progressive approaches to learning that involve independent thinking and doing (Moore, 2006), some cultures still favor and even praise rote learning. Families with a Hafiz (the title given to individuals that have memorized the entire Koran) member hold special status in some communities.

In addition, families that encourage children to become Hafiz show a significant value to education and learning, thus should be recognized as supportive of their children's educational achievements. However, because memorization is not a legitimized form of reading strategy (in fact, is mostly discouraged) educators usually miss the opportunity to utilize this unique and significant skill in schools. Rather than utilizing this reading style tradition to scaffold classroom learning, educators attempt to retrain children. Most western educators essentially dismiss the home and community as learning environments.

Some scholars have recognized the need to focus on the home as a learning environment and important resource for schools, and have begun the process of exploring home learning practices. Most notable is Gonzalez et al. (1995), with their *Funds of Knowledge* work in Latino communities. The *Funds of Knowledge* project aimed to reposition teachers as teacher-researchers in the context of home visits with Latino families. The goal of the project was to “draw upon the knowledge and other resources found in local households for the development of classroom practices” (p. 446). Teachers participating in the project were trained to use qualitative research methods (i.e., participant observer) in order to enter homes to document existing resources that could be used in classroom settings. Positioning teachers as learners allowed for the “formation of new relationships with families” (p. 445), where teachers aimed to recognize households as “containing important social and intellectual resources” (p. 445). This project design had a significant impact on the field of educational research because it “demystified] the traditional authority of university-based researchers” (p. 444) and welcomed the creative approach of teachers as data collectors and reflective practitioners in the research process.

Results showed that teachers were able to recognize household resources that could be used in the classroom and have a greater understanding of households as spaces of learning. Furthermore, these studies suggest that home-visit experiences by teachers are potentially transformative for them, whereby deficit models can be replaced by better understanding of how families sacrifice and value education (p. 458). In addition, teachers expressed a process of *unlearning*, where traditional parent–teacher interactions were redefined to meet the needs of families in the context of Latino communities. This experience of *unlearning* highlights the need for greater attention to teacher preparation so as to engage in meaningful parent–teacher partnerships with ethnic minority populations.

In short, there is strong evidence to suggest that schools sanction specific practices that facilitate or impede parental involvement in K–12 settings. For example, attending parent–teacher conferences and school sponsored events, sharing (or accepting) the existing school culture, and implementing “appropriate” teaching strategies at home (Carreón et al., 2005; Paratore et al., 1994; Pomerantz et al., 2007). In essence *school presence* is defined as parental involvement and indicative of family support of education. However, school presence may be the one thing that impedes parental involvement for some families, particularly immigrant families. In a report released by the Adult Learner Resource Center (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008), created for the Illinois State Board of Education, barriers and challenges faced by immigrant and refugee parents when attempting to become active participants in their children’s education in the United States include: Language proficiency, cultural expectations, isolation, busy

personal lives, family trauma, and lack of welcoming atmosphere in some schools (p. 1–3). In addition, some immigrant families also deal with problems related to social needs, such as having food and shelter, which are essential to their survival (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). These challenges have been shown to have a significant influence on the level of presence possible for immigrant parents in U.S. schools. The reality is that for immigrant parents the current sanctioned forms of parental involvement are too narrow, and need to be redefined and expanded. Consequently, these sanctioned forms of “appropriate” parental involvement become impediments for many immigrant families.

Adding to this issue of narrowed perceptions of parent involvement is also how schools and teachers perceive immigrant families’ abilities to support student learning. Schools fail to recognize the existing resources immigrant families have to support their children’s education, and for the most part try to impose their ideology of school success. Whitehouse and Colvin (2001) report that

[w]hen communities become increasingly diverse, instruction in schools often continue to emphasize the language, culture, and values of the mainstream population as a way to resist the shifting demographics. Moreover, there is often the unstated belief that transforming culturally diverse families to mirror mainstream families will produce educational and economic success for their children. Not surprisingly, these colliding differences between pedagogy and population result in tension and confusion on the part of students, parents, teachers, and school officials. (p. 212)

In other words, the expectation of schools continues to be that immigrant or minority families will assimilate and embody the school culture. This approach creates a one-way relationship between home and school, where parents must change behaviors

and beliefs whereas schools are free to remain unchanged. As Edwards and Warin (1999) put it, “collaboration between school and home seems to have been superseded by the colonization of the home by the school” (p. 337). It is no wonder that parents increasingly feel pressured to adopt sanctioned forms of school cultures while sacrificing their own (Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007).

This dissertation study provides a unique contribution by exploring the ways in which parents and school staff construct, define, and perceive parent involvement in particular school spaces. Therefore, this work focuses on parent involvement beyond the traditional parent–teacher paradigm. The review of Bourdieu’s theoretical frame and current issues surrounding parent involvement in this chapter provides the foundation needed to understand the findings reported in this work.

## Chapter 3

### Navigating Fieldwork: Ethnography in the Urban Context

This dissertation investigates the experiences of immigrant parents and school staff as they navigate the process of building relationships. This task required considerable time in the field observing and interacting with both parents and school personnel as they construct relationships. Investigating human relationships is no easy task, and calls for a large amount of data gathering for analysis. The only way to document ways in which parent involvement expectations are communicated and enacted is through an ethnographic research approach, including the collection of a variety of data through the use of ethnographic tools. For example, in this study I relied on observations, formal and informal interviews with staff, and participant observations at different school events and meetings. Given the type of data I needed to collect to build deeper understanding of parent involvement expectations, ethnography was the only reliable choice as a research methodology. Ethnography, broadly speaking, is a research approach that aims to offer a holistic account of people; its “about telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story” and “giv[ing] voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a “thick” description of events” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 1).

Ethnographic research tools such as fieldwork, participant observations, and interviewing allow greater opportunity for insight into the process immigrant parents undergo as they engage with U.S. schools. Because this dissertation aimed to investigate the interactions of parents and school staff, fieldwork was vital and, as Charmaz (2006) explains, this type of investigation can only be accomplished by fieldwork:

Ethnography means recording the life of a particular group and thus entails sustained participation and observation in their milieu, community, or social world. It means more than participant observation alone because an ethnographic study covers the round of life occurring within the given milieu(x) and often includes supplementary data from documents, diagrams, maps, photographs, and, occasionally, formal interviews and questionnaires. Participant observers may limit their focus to one aspect of daily life. In contrast, ethnographers seek detailed knowledge of the multiple dimensions of life within the studied milieu and aim to understand members' taken-for-granted assumptions and rules (Ashworth, 1995; Charmaz & Olesen, 1997, p. 21).

With this approach in mind, I embarked in a year-long study at Community High where I immersed myself in the daily routines at the school and community. Unlike most of the current studies of parental involvement that rely heavily on surveys and quantitative methodologies, this study aimed to document human experiences. Therefore, an ethnographic design that would allow me to document firsthand the experiences of school staff and parents was essential.

### **Research Setting**

Common Grounds City<sup>2</sup> is a small urban community at the edge of a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The city is the most diverse in the state with over half of its total population of 30,104 being comprised of people of color. The 2010 U.S. Census data for Common Grounds reports people of color as belonging to Black or African American (25.9%)<sup>3</sup>, Asian (14.3%), Latino (9.6%), American Indian (0.8%), Other race (5.4%), two or more races (4.4%) and Native Hawaiian (0.1%). This small community is more diverse than the adjacent large metropolitan area. Residents speak a variety of

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<sup>2</sup> All names (city, school, staff, partnerships) included in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> This includes both U.S. born and non-U.S. born. A significant number of the population is of African descent (e.g., Somali).

different language with a total of 24.9% speaking a language other than English, Spanish at 9.1% being the most common language. Evidence of diversity can be identified throughout the community with several community resources specific to its different ethnic groups (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants, resource centers, community outreach organizations). Foreign-born persons comprise 21.4% of the population compared to 7% reported at the state.

Like many communities nationwide, Common Grounds City suffered the consequences of the recent economic recession. The median household income is reported at \$49,226 compared to \$57,243 reported in the state. At the time of the study, unemployment rate was at 8.8%, compared to the national average of 7.8%, and foreclosure was the third highest in the state. Signs of a struggling community were evident. I saw businesses with closed notices, for sale and foreclosure signs, and most significantly a large shopping center that remained abandoned for the duration of the study. The community, particularly the schools, also held several events for homeless families. One particular event I attended in partnership with the local YMCA, provided students with haircuts, dental and vision screenings, food and personal hygiene kits (e.g., toothpaste, toothbrush, deodorant).

Common Grounds City has four different school districts within its borders. Local and state open enrollment policies allow residents to enroll in any of the school districts. Additionally, several students from surrounding cities, including the adjacent large metropolitan area, also open enroll into the various district schools. This study took place in the Common Grounds Public School district, the smallest of the 4 districts with only 1

elementary school, high school and alternative school. Open enrollment accounts for 33% of the 1,700 students in the district.<sup>4</sup> Although small, the district has one of the most diverse student populations in the state. The most unique aspect of the Common Grounds District is its community philosophy approach to learning. According to Mr. Marvin, the district superintendent for the past 7 years, the community school idea was a way to organize current school–community partnerships and help address the barriers to learning identified in the district. When I asked Mr. Marvin how the community school concept began he explained:

It kind of got started with my sitting down, I think it was my second year here, I forget, second or third year and I was looking at all the partnerships we had and how we kind of leaned on those partnerships, and I think they benefited from us too. And I've been for maybe 8 or 9 years following the UCLA partner psychology stuff on various learning... I mean, we had these partners doing things that help eliminate barriers. We had these barriers, how do we coordinate it, you know? ... So just about that time, I was familiar with the concept of community schools but about that time was when Obama was elected and he appointed Arnie Duncan who had 50 or more community schools in the Chicago schools where he came from. And I got to thinking we really are a community school district. Technically by definition we weren't because the things weren't connected to the school. The partners weren't talking to each other but we had all the pieces so how do we pull it together and make it work? And here we are. (December 15, 2011 interview)

As Mr. Marvin explains in this interview excerpt, the district already had several components of what is considered a community school model. When he took over as superintendent, Mr. Marvin recognized the need and benefit of officially identifying the school as a community school and solidifying the already existing community partners. At its core the term community school is used to identify schools that focus on creating

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<sup>4</sup> Data are taken from district and school website.

school–community–family partnerships to support the learning of children. According to the Community School Coalition, “a community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities.”<sup>5</sup> A common theme in school documents, advertising and administrative discourses was the idea of whole child development rather than academic performance alone. The school website proudly reports over 100 community partnerships that work collaboratively to support the learning of students. In their words:

At Common Grounds schools we see our students grow in so many ways. We also see that all students need to be healthy and happy before they are ready to learn in the classroom...we will work with families and the community to help ensure all of our children are socially, mentally, and physically ready to participate in positive ways in and out of school. Schools alone cannot provide all the services needed, which is why we are becoming a Community Schools District. As a Community School District, we have a growing set of partnerships between our schools and community organizations to provide educational, enrichment and support services to students and families so that our children can be safe and stable in school, at home, and in the community. Partnerships help us to serve the whole child, including before and afterschool programs; mental, medical and dental services; academic supports; and family resource centers...join us as we unite to eliminate barriers to learning and raise healthy and happy children together.

Perhaps the most significant partnership is the onsite health center at the high school that provides a full range of free health care to students. The health center has doctors, dentists, and counselors that work in partnership with local hospitals and clinics. The school also works with a variety of community partners to provide students and

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<sup>5</sup> Definition taken from the Coalition for Community School website.

families with various resources from financial support to pay a heating bill to tenant training. During my year at the school I observed and participated in several events that involved these partners. For example, a legal clinic where families could receive free legal advice, tax preparation workshops, free adult ESL classes, computer workshops, early childhood services, emergency food shelf, prenatal classes, to name a few. The school prides itself in being a resource and referral service to students and families in the area. Although district administrators framed these partnerships as beneficial resources, I will later discuss how they were also a source of confusion and disengagement for some families.

### **Community High School<sup>6</sup>**

Community High is a small, urban high school with a highly diverse student population. According to the state department of education data, the school student demographic is 46.5% Black, 22.7% white, 15.9% Asian, 14.1% Hispanic, and 0.8% American Indian. At the time of the study enrollment was around 750 students, with 50 students at the alternative school. During my time at Community High, it was evident that students came from a variety of cultures, immigrant status and socioeconomic backgrounds. Several students were defined as homeless youth, and as previously mentioned, obtained additional social services from the school. There was also a significant undocumented student population, which I will discuss in more detail in later chapters. Additionally, students came from homes where English was not the primary

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<sup>6</sup> I selected the name Community High School to highlight the school's strong commitment to community partnerships and whole student development. The term community was also used in several discourses throughout the school and thus reflects a unique characteristic of the school vision and mission.

language, about 36% of students in the school use English language services. I saw school materials translated into at least 3 languages (Spanish, Hmong and Somali), and during parent–teacher conferences interpreters were provided. However, on at least one occasion I also observed a student interpreting for his Russian-speaking parents during parent–teacher conferences. Finally, about 68% of students in the district and 80% of students at Community High are eligible for free and reduced lunch.<sup>7</sup> The school also provides free meals for all students throughout the summer months. Although the school was eligible for Title I funds, it did not receive them. During one of my conversations with the principal, she indicated that Title I funding was given to the district for allocation and thus it was only used for the elementary school.

Community High is an Art Magnet and International Baccalaureate<sup>8</sup> world school offering a rich and comprehensive performing arts curriculum. Currently, the school offers a combination program, an IB Middle Years Program (IB MYP) curriculum is offered in grades 7–10 and the Art Magnet program is offered grades 7–12. Community High has received a Magnet School of Excellence award for the past 3 years, and its IB program has recently been authorized to add grades 10–12. The school website proudly states that the Art Magnet program is recognized internationally and visitors from United Kingdom and India come to learn about its success. The school curriculum offers a wide range of courses, from traditional IB college prep courses to specially designed Art

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<sup>7</sup> Free and reduced lunch eligibility is based on household income, at the time of the study a family of four with income less than \$28,665 qualified for free lunch and with income between \$28,665-\$40,793 qualified for reduced-price lunch.

<sup>8</sup> Art Magnet is a term given to public schools that have a specialized curriculum focused in the arts. These schools attract and welcome students outside their district boundaries. International Baccalaureate is a specialized academic curriculum focused on international education.

Magnet courses such as music technology lab and T.V. production. The school also has a strong Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, an onsite program that helps students prepare for college and requires enrollment in honors and advance placement courses. AVID student profiles are prominently displayed throughout the school next to their college acceptance letters. Community High has an English Language program that provides students with language development courses and some content courses that earn graduation credits. The school has an extensive special education program. Although the school has a rich curriculum and wide range of programs to support students, it continues to perform poorly in standardized testing and struggles with low academic achievement records.

The school is categorized as a low performing school by the state department of education. In response, Community High has created numerous programs to address student performance including an Advisory program, which helps support students throughout their secondary years. The main feature of the program is to provide homework help and test preparation in a small class environment. The idea is that one teacher will follow and be responsible for a small group of students throughout their high school years. Fostering this personal relationship is intended to help identify student needs and provide appropriate resources and interventions. During the time of my study school programs, the IB curriculum and diploma requirements were discussed in detail during school staff-parent interactions.

Community High was housed in a beautiful and well-kept building. As you walk through the building you can recognize student artwork on the walls. There are clean and

bright hallways, orderly administrative offices (including an office for the Police School liaison) and an overall sense of a safe school environment. Students and staff clearly respect school property and help maintain a school environment conducive for learning. Community High has a state of the art library and media center with several computers, and a conference room with multimedia viewing equipment. Beautiful murals are displayed in the cafeteria, which served a variety of nutritious menu items. The school also has a bright commons area with tables and artwork displays utilized by both students and visitors. A large gym with basketball courts, a beautiful and large auditorium used for graduation ceremonies and special events, well equipped science labs, outdoor football and soccer fields are visible signs of a wealthy learning school environment. The school has an extensive and state of the art monitoring system, with cameras throughout the building.

In contrast to this description of order and abundance, during my time at the school, serious issues related to funding, teenage pregnancy, gangs and drugs were frequent topics of conversations among staff and parents. Although the school building was well maintained, budget cuts were a visible reality with frequent staff layoffs. Teenage pregnancy was also a high priority issue. It was not uncommon to see girls pregnant walking the halls of the high school. The school had the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the state at 60.4 births per 1,000, and received grant money to implement sex education and support programs. This funding paid for additional school staff to provide sex education services to students on site, and funded a partnership with

the Annex Teen Clinic.<sup>9</sup> The alternative school building provided students with a child care center service and was in the process of building its own onsite center. Discussions related to student gang involvement were frequent among both parents and school staff. Finally, the presence of drugs in the school was no secret because it was widely known that students were suspended for selling drugs or using drugs in the restroom. In addition, Community High has been identified as a persistently low achieving school and is at the bottom 5% of secondary schools<sup>10</sup> in the state.

Community High receives funding from a variety of sources, including a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Grant to provide after school programs and a School Improvement Grant (SIG)<sup>11</sup> to help implement a comprehensive plan to address issues of student achievement. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Grant provides Community High with additional staff, who run a variety of programs including tutoring and summer enrichment programs. SIG funding provides support to a comprehensive school improvement plan that includes redesigning assessment tools and an evaluation of student outcomes, teacher workshops to improve quality of instruction, increase understanding of differentiated instruction strategies, and parental involvement efforts. Currently the school does not have a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or any other active parent group. Additionally, based on the

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<sup>9</sup> The Annex Teen Clinic provides low cost, confidential, nonjudgmental sexuality-related health care for adolescents and young adults through age 25.

<sup>10</sup> Information taken from the state department of education school profile page.

<sup>11</sup> SIG “grants funds are for the purpose of turning around the identified persistently lowest achieving Tier I and Tier II schools in the state by substantially raising the achievement of students attending those schools.”

Minnesota Department of Education Quality Review Report 2010, Community High's record with parent involvement is "fair."<sup>12</sup> The report states:

The school values parental input and welcomes parents' support for their children's education. Despite attempts to increase parental involvement, the numbers who actively support their children's education are not as high as the school would like. Attendance at parent teacher conferences is improving but still not high. Even when students put on public performances, such as concerts, the number of parents attending is sometimes disappointing. The school sends out information to parents in a number of ways through report cards, newsletters and by electronic means, but parents still feel that communication could be improved. The school translates communications into the main home languages but does not have access to translation services for all languages. Workshops to improve parents' knowledge of student learning and to help them support students are not well established. This limits the support that parents can give the school.<sup>13</sup>

In an effort to address issues of parent involvement, the school purchased and implemented a parent education program named *Knowledgeable Parents* (KP).<sup>14</sup> The program brochure states that KP "parents meet 1 night per week for 7 weeks to learn how to navigate the school system to ensure student success... KP parents are committed parents who are excited to have new knowledge and confidence in navigating our confusing K–12 and higher education systems. Through KP, parents will also be introduced to an array of financial aid and scholarship opportunities." At the time of the study, the program was offered in English and Spanish, and although a Hmong class began, low attendance resulted in closure after 3 weeks. The program is based on the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) curriculum, and during my study, I

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<sup>12</sup> A score of fair means 'present, though limited and/or inconsistent'

<sup>13</sup> Taken from Quality Review Report on the Minnesota Department of Education website for Community High. This report is open to the public and is required as part of receiving SIG funding.

<sup>14</sup> As a reminder, all names of participants, school, and programs are pseudonyms.

participated in 1 PIQE facilitator workshop<sup>15</sup> held at the school and 4 KP programs. The KP program experience became the foundation of my research and will be described in more detail later in the study.

### **Methodology**

Early in my doctoral program I was interested in issues of immigrant parent involvement and I conducted several small studies on related topics. One such study involved the analysis of discourse in parent-teacher conferences between immigrant parents and ESL teachers (Aleixo, 2008). I presented the results of this study at a state conference where I met the Department of Education parent liaison. I maintained contact with her throughout my program and when it came time to find a research site we met to discuss school options. She suggested Community High because of their newly implemented parent involvement initiatives. I then contacted Sandra, the KP coordinator at Community High by email and set up a meeting. After explaining my study and goals, Sandra suggested I meet with the school principal to propose my study. I met with Principal Jones a few weeks later, and once again presented my project and goals. Principal Jones was welcoming and excited about the idea of expanding her relationship with the university. She explained that my next step would be to present my research proposal to a small group of staff and teachers. If they were on board, I would then present the proposal at the next school board meeting for formal approval. The entire process took about 4 to 5 weeks, and once access was granted I was given a school badge with my name and introduced to the front desk staff. I began coming to the school 3 to 4

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<sup>15</sup> PIQE facilitator workshop was the training provided to school staff for eligibility to facilitate the local KP program that was adapted from the National PIQE program.

times a week, walking the hallways, meeting people, attending KP sessions, and volunteering in the family resource room. I became a familiar face at Community High. The small size of the school and district was extremely beneficial to my access to school staff and administrators. I had access to custodial staff, administrators and everyone in between. I frequently met and spoke to parents, the principal, superintendent and other staff members in the hallways or offices. As my presence at the school became common, I was frequently invited to attend planning meetings, parent-staff meetings, and after school programs and activities.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data from February 2011 through December 2011, although I continued to visit the school and meet with staff until the summer of 2012. I collected data primarily at the school and in the community. Initially, I spent about 3 to 4 days a week at the high school observing and participating in school activities and daily schedules, during the summer months this was reduced to 2 to 3 days a week. During the summer I participated in 1 KP training workshop, and 1 KP session. There was also a parent group that met during the summer to reflect on their KP experience and plan parent activities for the upcoming school year. In addition, the less hectic summer school environment allowed me more opportunities to shadow school staff and conduct formal interviews. On average I spent 10 hours a week at Community High. Most of my observation time was spent at the family resource room, health center, and KP evening meetings. I attended several school-sponsored events. Because of the overwhelming number of events offered at the school, I focused on attending activities that intentionally

included parents such as Multicultural Night events, parent discussion groups, 5K fundraising walk, college tours, parent–teacher conferences, and college and financial informational nights. However, I also attended several events designed for students, particularly minoritized students for example a “college options discussion” for Latina students, Hmong students against substance abuse night, and a Youth Connection Night. In many cases, I was invited to attend school administrative planning meetings (e.g., planning meeting for Multicultural Nights; Health Center end-of-year report). One particular example is when I was invited to the police station for a meeting between the police community liaison and the school family liaison. When I was not in a meeting or particular activity I would usually hang out at the media center, commons area or family resource center. When I greeted parents or school staff I would say I was a doctoral student from the University of Minnesota doing research on parent involvement at Community High. I would also signal my researcher status during conversations, for example I would say “as a researcher” or “as a doctoral student.” By doing this I hoped the school staff, teachers and students would be aware of my role. On numerous occasions I engaged in informal conversations with parents and staff related to a variety of topics that were used as data for this study. These conversations took place at various school spaces, like the media center, hallways, family resource center, health center, and even the parking lot. As a participant observer I usually was the note keeper and took minutes during KP classes and planning meetings. As Sandra would point out on occasion, I was already taking notes anyway.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Although I agreed to take minutes and detailed notes of meeting discussion, I did not share my research

Although Community High was my primary data collection site, I also made efforts to immerse myself in the surrounding community. I had lunch at local restaurants, filled my car with gas at the corner station, and visited the police station and local community resource centers on various occasions. I sometimes saw school staff and parents outside of school in the community and recorded field notes on these encounters. The Community Resource Center, considered a hub for school parents and local residents to access resources was another significant data collection site. I met parents at the center and also interviewed staff members about their experiences interacting with immigrant families.

I gathered a variety of data during my study; see Table 2 for a detailed list. My primary source of data included detailed field notes of my observations. My focus was on interactions between school staff and parents, specifically topics of conversations, ways in which each group expressed their perceptions of each other, the school, and education in general. I was interested in learning how families' social environment impacted their interactions with school agents. Being a participant–observer in these various sites and activities allowed me to create a holistic picture of how interactions occurred at Community High and how parent involvement was enacted within the school. I took notes during my time at the school, and also audiorecorded field notes on my 30-minute drive home after each observation at the school. I audiorecorded all meetings, parent discussion groups, administrative planning meetings, and other semiformal interactions between parents and school staff members. I shadowed some staff members, particularly

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field notes with school staff. I would provide them with a formal outline/summary of minutes taken for each meeting. This document looked and read differently than my research notes.

the bilingual family liaison, during the study. This shadowing method was mainly following in the day-to-day work activities of school staff. During my shadowing, I took notes, audio recorded interactions, asked questions, and assisted with minor duties (e.g., holding materials). Shadowing allowed me to gather naturally occurring data, because individuals would just perform routine work activities (e.g., attend meetings, write reports, interact with parents and students, and respond to email and voicemail). Please review Table 1 to identify the name and role of study participants reported in this dissertation.

Table 1

*Participants*

Name	School Role
Marvin	District Superintendent
Jones	Community High Principal
Sandra	Family Liaison
Lourdes	Family Liaison (first 3 months of study)
Sofia	Bilingual Family Liaison
Jorge	Guidance Counselor
Heather	Guidance Counselor
Beth	Testing Coordinator
Elizabeth	Social Worker
Mr. Joe	Social Studies Teacher
Ms. Bao	Social Studies Teacher
Mr. Gonzales	ELL Teacher and Coordinator
Mr. Edwards	Behavior Dean

Other sources of data included collecting numerous communication materials between school and home, such as flyers, brochures, school announcements, official calendars, legal documents related to truancy, newspapers, meeting agendas, and program information materials. Please review Table 2 for a detailed list of data sources. These materials helped inform my understanding of the school's parent involvement expectation. Additionally, in order to follow up on my observations and provide sources for triangulation I periodically conducted formal interviews with staff members (see Appendix B for a sample interview protocol) and met with parents to explore in more detail their perceptions and understanding of parental involvement.

Table 2

*Data Sources*

Data	Samples
School documents and materials	Annual Calendar (1) Brochures (6) Flyers (7) School website information KP curriculum (51 pages in English, 101 pages in Spanish) KP training materials (2) KP handouts (5) Bilingual KP handout (1) Handouts (2) Job Descriptions (1) Meeting Agendas (2) Bilingual information sheets (3) Information sheets (11) School directory (1) Multicultural Night materials (1) School map and class assignments (1) Bilingual Health Center information (1)
Community Documents	Brochures (11) Flyers (6) Booklets (3) Newspapers (3) Community Resource and Residents' Guide (1) City demographic information packet (1) Bilingual invited presenter handout (1) Television news segment (2)
Field Notes	400 hours** (Transcription of recorded field notes 2.3 hours*)
School events	5K walk Youth Connection Night Hmong students against substance abuse Latino student college information session College information night Parent-teacher conference KP graduation ceremony Multicultural Nights College Visit field trip
School meetings	Health Center end-of-year meeting School Board Meeting Police Liaison and School Family Liaison meeting Dean of Discipline meeting with parents Guidance Counselor and Family Liaison meeting

Data	Samples
<i>Table 2, continued</i>	
Transcription of recordings	
Knowledgeable Parents sessions	84 hours*
Parent Meeting	4.1 hours*
Formal Interviews	16.8 hours*
Informal conversations with school staff	3.8 hours*
Shadowing of school staff	7.2 hours*

\* Only indicates recorded hour amount but does not represent actual time spent and written field notes that followed.

\*\* This is an approximate number of hours spent at the school throughout the study, hours based on 2–3 weekly visits for an average of 10 hours a week over 11 months.

## Data Analysis

The observations and field notes were reviewed, coded, and analyzed throughout the study. Analyzing data throughout the study allowed me to explore emerging themes, and focus subsequent data gathering. Initial observations and field notes helped inform and guide new areas to explore at the research site. I began data collection in the 2011 spring semester; during this time I observed, wrote field notes, conducted formal interviews and most importantly collected a variety of school materials. As Charmaz (2006) explains, “texts draw on particular discourses and provide accounts that record, explore, explain, justify, or foretell actions, whether the specific texts are elicited or extant” (p. 35). The school materials collected for this particular study were considered extant texts<sup>17</sup> and a significant source of initial data. A text analysis was conducted 4 months into the study to gain a better understanding of the documented expectations the

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<sup>17</sup> Documents and materials “the researcher had no hand in shaping” (Charmez, 2006).

school had of parent involvement. Texts were reviewed to inform the school's perceptions of parent involvement. For example, some documents were translated to multiple languages while others were not, analysis of the content of these documents can inform what the school perceived as important or necessary information for certain groups of parents. The text analysis helped guide new directions to explore within the school.

Interviews and audiorecorded observations and field notes were reviewed and transcribed. Because I interviewed and gathered data from speakers of other languages, transcriptions were done in the original language used in recording interaction; thus for example both English and Spanish were used during transcription. Once all audiorecorded data were transcribed coding began, the first phase of coding involved an incident-by-incident open coding through the use of a computer software program<sup>18</sup>. During this process, close attention was given to emerging data. Open coding was done both manually and through the use of computer software. The second phase of coding can be described as identifying themes; this was an inductive analysis process. However, the use of deductive analysis was also present because I was focused on particular issues during data collection. For example, I purposefully engaged in conversations and asked questions about perceptions of parent involvement, thus "definitions of parent involvement" was a deductive code used during analysis. During the second phase of analysis themes were identified and the process of establishing all-encompassing themes

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<sup>18</sup> Only recorded materials and written field notes were coded through the use of computer software. School documents and some field notes were coded and analyzed manually.

began, see Table 3 for more details on the process of moving from open coding to themes.

Table 3

*Sample of Open Coding to Final Themes*

General Theme: Parent Involvement Expectations	
Sub Theme I: Spaces and Teacher Access	Sub Theme II: Presence and Internet Access
Access to Teachers	Internet Access and Use
Formal and Informal Spaces	Ways of Being Present
Interactions with School Staff	Conference Attendance
Family Resource Center	Assumption of parent needs
Community Resources	Awareness of immigrant family needs
Creating parent cross-cultural communities	Barriers to getting parents involved
Defining community	Defining parent engagement success
District financial situation	Discourse of school staff authority
District focus on community school environment	Family reading practices observed
Informal spaces for interactions	Lack of cultural awareness and training
Lack of continuity of programs and ideas	Limited access to online resources
Miscommunication between home and school	Low expectation of minority families
New school programs	Online resources for parents
Opportunities to interact more with teachers	Parent perceptions of caring
Parent authority vs. state law	Parent perceptions of school
Police presence at CH	Parent perceptions of involvement
Purpose of school	Parent responsibility
Reaching out to families	Parent–student interactions at home
School resources vs. social services	Perceptions of diversity
Teacher home visit	Personal experience with parent involvement
School procedures	Potential language barriers
School environment	Redefining parent
AVID	Resources offered by KP program
KP background and roots	School communication strategy
KP discussion topics	School definition of parent involvement
SIG	School staff advice to parents

### **Researcher Role: Insider–Outsider Negotiations**

Conducting ethnographic studies is not without risk. As a novice researcher I was aware that engaging in ethnography would require considerable time and commitment. However, the experience came loaded with additional dilemmas regarding identity and managing emotional investment. It quickly became clear to me that regardless of how I introduced or positioned myself, participants' perceptions of me would reposition me throughout the study. I entered the field committed to establishing the understanding that I was a university researcher and that interactions with me would likely become data in my study. I was aware that building rapport would require sharing my own immigrant story. I had hoped that my immigrant background would provide a shared background with parents, and my credentials as an educational researcher would help connect me to school staff. However, as I soon discovered, the insider–outsider identity in the field is much more complicated.

First I acknowledge that I am deeply committed to advocating for immigrant rights both in and outside the school. I believe schools have a responsibility to educate all learners and support their individual needs. I firmly support the notion that linguistically and culturally diverse learners should be seen as added resources rather than problems in the education systems. Additionally, I feel it is the school's obligation to initiate, encourage, and support parent engagement particularly for immigrant families that are learning to navigate a new school system. I am an immigrant, but unlike most of my participants, my narrative is one that reflects high social and cultural capital. I do not always identify as Latina because the discourses of inclusion for Brazilians in Latina

identities can be complicated, and I am still learning to navigate them. I speak Spanish, but my confidence level limits my full participation during group discussions. I have a husband and son, and would say my family unit reflects a traditional middle class family. All these personal attributes served to position me in the field as both insider and outsider. I fully understand that my researcher identity was in many occasions out of my control, and participants' decisions on identifying me as insider or outsider was in most cases contextually based.

Discussions on insider–outsider researcher identities are not new; in fact several prominent scholars have explored the issue in their recent research (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; DeAndrade, 2000; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Thomson & Gunter, 2011). In their work with Indigenous communities Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) share their experience building and maintaining relationships with their participants. Although Brayboy identified himself as an Indigenous person he struggled with an insider position within the community because of his researcher identity, he explains:

By asking them [student participants] to allow me to spend time with them both in and out of classes, I was building knowledge base for rich data collection. Simultaneously, however, I acted in a manner unlike a “real Indian”. I asked to do things I was not invited to do, wrote about relationships being built, and made myself present in a variety of situations where I normally would not be present... To act in a more culturally appropriate manner, I would have nodded as I passed people and waited for them to invite me to do things. However, if I had done this, I may never have been invited (p. 164).

Similar to Brayboy, I also recognized instances where my *insiderness* was challenged, when parents shared information on their immigrant experiences I often had a recorder or took notes. This, of course, is not common practice in routine conversations,

and even though I contributed to the dialogue with my own immigrant experiences, participants would often ask, “Are you going to use this in your study?” There were several situations in which participants embraced me as an insider, particularly in conversations related to culture and family. There was a clear sense that parents and especially Sofia, the Latina family liaison, viewed me as sharing their cultural values and behaviors. One instance was when Sofia spoke about her experiences interpreting; she explained that it was sometimes difficult to be an interpreter because it was hard to separate your emotions. She said “they [school staff] tell me I just have to translate and not get involved, but you know how *we* are in our culture, *we* can’t be cold”; here Sofia referred to a shared understanding that in Latino culture personal interactions are filled with emotional investments regardless of context (e.g., workplace). She positioned me as an insider; however, in several other interactions Sofia would also position me as an outsider. This experience aligns with Thomson and Gunter’s (2011) argument that insider–outsider research identities are “continuously shifting” and consequently may be of “limited utility” in “discussions of participatory research in schools” (p. 25). However, I contend that in my study the insider–outsider binary helps provide deeper insight to routine interactions between participants and the researcher.

Considering my methods of gaining access to the research site through administrative channels, many of the parents perceived me as an insider to the school. My dual position, as both insider and outsider, created limitations on what realms I could access. For example, because parents perceived me as both university researcher and school representative, they resisted my attempts to collect data in their homes. On

several occasions when I encountered parents in the community, they would ask me questions about the school (e.g., What time is the next KP meeting?). On other occasions, I would meet parents at the Community Resource Center and they would ask for assistance with interpreting, a request I felt wrong denying. The reality was that my daily presence in the school and visibility to parents unintentionally positioned me as an extension of the school staff, and therefore requests for home visits were uncomfortable for immigrant parents.

This became problematic and consequently forced me to reconsider the decision of entering family homes. Although I can only infer, I assumed that parents' resistance to the presence of a "school representative" in their homes indicated the fragile relationship between the school-home at Community High. I feared that pushing my request would jeopardize the work the school had been doing to build rapport among the community, and consequently impact the relationships I had built in the school with staff and parents. Second, as a researcher I was aware of the literature surrounding home visits, and how it can be perceived as "inspections." Although projects like Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) have done incredible work in immigrant homes, as an immigrant myself, I am uniquely aware of the anxiety regarding home visits by school officials. For many immigrant families, the home space does not reflect traditional expectations of "home environment" in U.S. society. With giving access comes at a personal risk to families, and my time at the research site was not sufficient to overcome some of these anxieties. Although parents were willing and welcomed interactions in the school and community, their homes remained a guarded space.

Issues on insider–outsider positioning were also present with school staff interactions although less problematic. School staff typically introduced me as researcher or volunteer during meetings and school events. During personal interactions, staff members clearly positioned me as outsider through references to my connections to the university and questions about my study. At planning meetings I was more of an insider and was an equal participant, staff members listened to my proposed ideas and I was included in negotiations and task allocations. Part of this fluid research identity included careful management of neutrality. Ergun and Erdemir (2010) explain:

Concerns related to preserving neutrality stem from scholarly, pragmatic, and ethical motivations. There are two main reasons to maintain a certain level of distance from the informants. First, although researchers want to go native to some extent to grasp the emic perspective, it is important to keep a certain level of distance for the sake of not losing their etic insights. Second, preserving distance is one of the crucial dimensions of ensuring continuing access to conflicting power factions in the field and building a trusting relationship with the informants...Preserving neutrality facilitated is not an easy task, particularly in settings in which there are strong polarizations, dichotomies, and/or conflict. Maintaining a neutral position necessitates constant efforts on the researcher's part to balance attempts to become an insider, on one hand, and to preserve the distance, on the other. (pp. 25–27)

Because I was interacting with both school staff and parents it became critical that I constantly address issues of neutrality during data collection. I avoided criticism of the school during parent interactions, and criticism of parents during school staff interactions. Neutrality was essential to building relationships across these two groups.

The in-between space of insider–outsider I had carved out at the research site also provided me with a considerable advantage. Although parents perceived me as indirectly part of the school, they were aware I was in fact a university researcher and thus granted

me permission to ask questions they may have felt uncomfortable answering directly to school staff. Our time together had afforded them the space to be candid about their immigrant experiences and critical of the school when necessary. Additionally, the duality of insider–outsider identities was also beneficial with my interactions with school staff; my knowledge of education allowed for greater equality in discourses, on the one hand, and my university researcher status granted me access to their less filtered opinion of the school–home interaction, on the other.

## Chapter 4

### Parent Involvement Expectations: Space and Teacher Access

In this chapter, I report ways in which parent involvement expectations were defined, constructed and communicated at Community High. I illustrate how interactions at school served to define parent involvement and consequently how they reinforced traditional constructs. At Community High, parent involvement was represented by interactions between parents and school staff rather than teachers. This suggests a significant oversight in the current literature that traditionally has focused on parent–teacher relationships when investigating parent involvement.

What counts as parent involvement has been widely reported in the literature (see Chapter 2); however, less is reported on how these expectations for involvement are communicated and enacted. At Community High, the staff relied on formal settings, such as parent information nights or parent program meetings, to communicate parent involvement expectations. In these settings, for example, the staff would directly make statements that suggested parent–teacher conference attendance was an important part of parent involvement. In some cases, school procedures indicated indirect instructions for parent involvement, such as the limited access to teachers and the required procedures for scheduling meetings with teachers. Evidence gathered at Community High suggests that parent involvement expectations are constructed and communicated during interactions with school staff, and potentially impact beliefs of what it means to be an involved parent within the U.S. school system.

## **Parent Involvement at Community High**

School events and interactions need to be understood in the context of their contested spaces. As Blase (1991) rightfully describes, “schools are complex, unpredictable social organizations that are extremely vulnerable to a host of powerful external and internal forces. They exist in a vortex of government mandates, social and economic pressures, and conflicting ideologies associated with school administrators, teachers, students and parents” (p. 1). This was certainly the case at Community High where routine interactions among staff reflect miscommunication and tensions, fears of layoffs, and budget cuts. Perhaps the most visible issue at the school was concerns with budget cuts and layoffs. The school had failed to pass a levy (total amount of money collected from property owners of the school district to cover the school district requests/costs) for several years, and besides the allocated state expenditure per student, they essentially operated on funding received through various grants. The staff and Principal Jones often reminded me of the importance of grant funding during our conversations. School administrators understood the importance of grant funding sources and generally welcomed them into the school as needed supplements to the school’s yearly budget. Grants provided additional staff to the school and allowed for the creation, implementation, and operation for several special programs (e.g., after school programs through First Century grant, and sex education programs). Unfortunately, programs provided through grants were temporary because grants typically are provided for specific periods of time. Supporting staff salaries in some cases were paid from different grant sources; for example, the salary for the bilingual family liaison Sofia came from the

school, a Health Center grant, KP funding, and Special Education resources. Sofia, the bilingual Spanish Family Liaison, would often joke that “they all pay a small part of my salary, but all think I work for them fulltime.”

Additionally, Sofia felt limited in her ability to build connections with Latino parents. She often shared that any of her ideas to engage with Latino parents would have to be approved and supervised by Sandra, the other Family Liaison; consequently, if Sandra was not available to participate in a parent meeting, it would not take place. Because Sofia spoke Spanish and was Latina, most of the Latino parents felt a strong connection with her and shared their personal stories and concerns. The KP sessions Sofia facilitated would last much longer because parents would stay after to talk and ask for help; Sofia and I would often stay at the school until 9 p.m. talking to parents.<sup>19</sup> She once shared that she thought Sandra was jealous of her time with parents. As more parents became aware of Sofia’s presence at the school, more sought her out for assistance. As Blase (1991) explains, “division of labor may promote the formation of interest groups competing against one another to achieve their common goals. Similarly, hierarchical task specialization may create differences among units in an organization on a number of salient dimensions, such as levels of power, goals, tasks, language, and training” (p. 3). Although Sofia and Sandra facilitated parent interactions with different groups of parents, Sandra’s close supervision and required participation in all activities organized by Sofia resulted in an additional barrier to Latino parent involvement at the school. Consider this scenario: Most of the staff was aware that the school had several

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<sup>19</sup> KP sessions met every Tuesday (High School) and Thursday (Elementary School) from 5:45 p.m.–8 p.m. Dinner and childcare were always provided.

undocumented students. During the Spanish KP session on financial aid, parents would often raise their hands and ask if a social security number was required to apply for financial aid. In one of our many private conversations, Sofia explained that the issue of undocumented families was particularly concerning during these financial aid nights. Sofia recognized the need to provide more relevant information for these families, for example, funding options for students without social security numbers. She even pointed out that the bilingual KP speaker was now learning about particular situations of parents at Community High, and how Latino parents and English speaking parents may have different needs regarding financial aid information. In her own words, Sofia explained that

Focusing on them in our situation, because he [presenter] knows that we're not all legal, and that there's going to be those questions, those concerns. I think now he's scared—I don't know if you noticed, but he very briefly went over the Pell grants and stuff because he knows that's for citizens—kids that have social security numbers; and then he just went down to the other portions. If we could keep it so that they know who they're talking to because what applies to Sandra's class is not going to be applying to our class because it's totally different. (November 10, 2011, private conversation)

Awareness of undocumented families resulted in several discussions about bringing in community organizations that specialized in providing information on financial aid for undocumented students. Sandra and Sofia spoke about inviting this organization; they sought out information and procedures for having them at the school, but a year had passed and they still had not visited. I inquired about this issue several times and even looked up information for Sofia. But when I would follow up with Sofia about having the organization in the school she explained that Sandra had to arrange the

visit, and when I asked Sandra she would say she was working on it. Bringing in a community organization to speak on pathways to college for undocumented students was not a particularly difficult task because there was no cost involved and KP already had an established financial aid session. It is hard to explain why this still had not happened.

The complex structure of schools with hierarchical decision-making procedures can make even minor tasks and changes challenging. Data from Community High suggest that changes at different levels of the school (e.g., schedule changes, early release schedule, and school start/end times) contributed to an increased level of confusion in the everyday school experience for students, staff, and parents. Because my data collection occurred during a calendar year, rather than a regular academic school year, I had the advantage of experiencing firsthand some of these school changes. In my interview with Heather, the school guidance counselor, early in the fall semester, we discussed some of these changes:

Heather: ... One of the things that's hard here at the school is every year there is change in our schedule or how we have classes or the time school starts or the time school gets out which is not good for American students and it really makes it complicated for new families as they just learn how the system works and then every year we change something.

MA: What changed this year?

Heather: We're an eight period and our advisory last year was in the middle of the day and this year it's at the end of the day and it's not really, 2 days are advisory, 2 days are intervention and what is intervention. So every year we're kind of reteaching everybody what we can offer students and how our system works.

MA: There are different programs, right? Yesterday I was at a meeting and they were talking about TAP? So there are new things.

Heather: And the TAP is a great idea, it's basically lunch detention in a creative way {inaudible 32:57} are more possible, so students get tapped

by their teachers for not turning in work or doing assessments then they have to go up to the lunchroom, but again this has never been a program so students go through the lunch line and then we say “sorry, you were tapped”. “What a TAP, what’s that?” so it seems to be a constant around here that we only try things for a year and when they don’t work then we reshuffle the system, hoping to find that thing that is going to work but you need those systems in place for a while to kind of work out the kinks. Our population is so mobile, we have so many families coming in and out that we really need something that is stagnant for many years versus changing little bits. Even little bits causes teachers to go out of whack so you can’t expect the students and new families to understand what is going on. (October 6, 2011, interview)

The introduction, implementation, and termination of different school programs at Community High potentially contributed to parents’ confusion of school procedures. During parent meetings and casual interactions with staff in the hallways, I observed several times parents asking about new programs and how they impacted their child. It was common for parents to bring flyers (sent home from the school) to KP sessions to ask for additional explanations about different programs.

Another example of an important school change was the 6<sup>th</sup> grade move from the elementary school building to the high school. The district was growing and space at the elementary school was limited; the district planned to move the 6<sup>th</sup> grade into Community High. I had heard whispers about this plan in the spring when I started the study. When the fall semester began, I was told a 6<sup>th</sup> grade migration committee was formed and the school had hired staff to help with the action plan. However, at this point the decision was already made. I participated in one of the committees’ planning meetings where they discussed the challenges of moving forward with the plan because parents were not involved in the decision process. It was clear that part of their role was to facilitate the expected resistance of parents. During my final interview with Principal Jones late in the

fall semester, I followed up on the issue of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade migration and the steps the school was taking to facilitate the transition. She detailed some of the school procedures in initiating the move, and explained the benefits and challenges regarding the issue:

Principal Jones: ... The school district is currently undergoing a transition where next year we'll be offering sixth-grade programming at the high school due to space overcrowding at the elementary school. And due to the fact that we think the high school has a lot of assets that would be very beneficial to sixth graders that the opportunities aren't available at the elementary school that the sixth graders may be ready for. Such as the really intense dance program we have here, the theater program, the TV studio. A lot of the resources that we have that sixth graders are ready to start taking advantage of.

MA: Mm-hm.

Principal Jones: So when we—and by we, I mean the district, the school district, when the school district first sort of like announced that this was the plan, the sixth grade moving to the high school and blah, blah, blah, I mean parents were—huge outcry you know. And at first the data collection was pretty informal, you know. And we had parents that would call and just be like, "I'm not sending my daughter there. Ahh." And some of the urban legends they've heard that I still say are untrue about you know packs of kids roaming the halls waiting to beat up other kids and stuff like that. And that's been a constant battle in the 7 years I've been here is just really fighting like those rumors in the community. But what we've done now is we actually had an informational table at the parent conferences at [the elementary school], which you probably saw.

(December 14, 2011, interview)

In her remarks, Principal Jones acknowledged that some efforts were made to get parents' input during the decision process through informal surveys. Although the response was negative, Principal Jones believed these responses were based on false rumors and misinformation about the school. The district decided to approve the move, and my understanding was that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade move was necessary because of space and the growing number of students entering the elementary school. In reality the move was not really up for discussion, because it had to happen. Principal Jones's comments

suggest that the district felt it would be easier to deal with the aftermath of the decision rather than include parents in the process. However as Payne (2008) suggests, “if people have some say in what goes on, they are likely to have higher morale, likely to be more invested in the business at hand” (p. 43), and in the case of Community High, more likely to understand the need for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade move. My observations suggest that neither the principal nor the committee seemed to recognize that parents had valid concerns.

The school had a surveillance system with cameras throughout the school. During my time at the school, I heard several accounts of students being suspended for drug use in the school building. Sofia and I had several conversations about her fears of moving her son, who was at the elementary school, to Community High because of the presence of drugs and gangs. She explained that although her presence at the school would allow her to closely supervise her son, she feared the school environment would be a negative influence. These concerns were heightened by police at the school, which had a designated school police liaison with a reserved parking space at the school lot and also an assigned office among the administrative staff. Additionally, several media sources like local and state newspapers reported on the issues of teen pregnancy at Community High, which had the highest rate in the state. The fears parents perceived were not entirely based on false rumors and misinformation.

### **School Spaces as Symbolic Representation of Involvement**

As reviewed earlier, school presence is perhaps the most significant indicator of parent involvement. School staff and teachers expect parents to attend, for example, parent-teacher conferences and school events, and studies have shown that parent

involvement in many cases is defined by participation in events within the school building (Carreón et al., 2005). At Community High there were several school events that staff perceived as required for parents. The following section describes where these events took place and details ways in which staff framed participation as symbolic representations of involvement. These events were perceived by staff as opportunities for parents to learn necessary information about school procedures; the interactions and communication during these events contributed to the construction of the parent involvement expectations at Community High.

As a community school, Community High provided some unique and permanent spaces for parents. One such space was the Family Resource Room, this room was located within the school and was where the Family Liaison's desks were located. I spent a lot of time in the Family Resource Room but rarely saw parents in the room, mostly students utilized the space to drop in between classes to speak to Lourdes and later to Sandra and Sofia. There was a conference table that was used for small group parent meetings. The room also had several racks with information pamphlets and brochures; these ranged from information on support for paying your electric bill to college access materials. Another space was the Health Center that was also located within the school. The year of the study was the first year the clinic was in operation. Of all the spaces in the school, the Health Center was certainly one where parents were always visibly present. I shadowed Sofia at the center weekly during my time at Community High and had the opportunity to meet and interact with several parents there. Sofia worked as both the Latino Family Liaison and the Health Center coordinator, and

these two positions consistently merged. For example, once a teacher walked into the clinic with several Latina students; the teacher was visibly angry and wanted Sofia to contact the students' parents immediately. The students were being disruptive in her physical education class, and she wanted parents notified. Once the teacher explained her side of the story and left, Sofia listened to the students and took their names and home numbers to contact parents. Students also often came to the clinic to discuss school issues with Sofia. On one occasion a student came in with a document she needed help understanding; it was a truancy notice that required her parents to appear in court. It took a long time for Sofia to ease the student's fear that her undocumented parents would not be at risk going to court because of her absence in school. Additionally, the school Spanish phone line was directed to Sofia, so she often spent her time resolving parent issues in between her duties at the clinic. It was hard for Sofia to separate her two positions, and she often mentioned the pressure from the school that she not work on school issues at the clinic, and vice versa, because of funding sources. This request was practically impossible because she was the only official Spanish bilingual staff member that parents could access freely.

Another important space for school parents was the Community Resource Center, located in a different building a few blocks from the high school. The center provided a variety of services to the community, including a preschool, Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language classes, computer access, clothing closet, and access to county government resources. I often met school parents when I was at the center speaking to the staff and observing. The center provided services to both school families

and community families attending other schools within the city limits. The center had its own designated Family Advocate that provided community resources and service assistance to parents.

The Family Resource Room, Health Center, and Community Resource Center were permanent spaces designed to provide needed resources for school parents, and to help support the school's commitment of being a community model school. During the study, I had the opportunity to observe in all these spaces and interact with both staff and parents. It is certainly my understanding that these spaces provided beneficial resources to parents and were a symbolic representation of the school's commitment to addressing the out-of-school needs of families. On one occasion I overhead a parent expressing his appreciation for these services, particularly the Health Center, which provided free care for students attending the district. In addition to the permanent physical space, Community High also provided a variety of school events for parents. Parent presence at these events was part of the school's expectation of parent involvement. This was evidenced by the frequency with which staff members mentioned school sponsored events during my interviews and casual conversations. The following section will detail the main events that were framed by staff as indicators of parent involvement.

### **Cultural and Family Nights**

I first heard about the cultural and family nights from Ms. Lourdes during the first 2 months of the study. She had been with the school since 2007 but found a job elsewhere and left early on in the study. I spent considerable time with Ms. Lourdes during the 2 to 3 months before she left. I shadowed her twice a week and had the opportunity to

interview her twice both during her time at the school and after she left. Ms. Lourdes worked in the Family Resource Room and her position was funded through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century grant. She described the Cultural and Family Nights during our final interview in late April,

When I did have those family nights when we first started was just listening to their [parents] perspectives. Like I remember we did this Asian family night and we had about seven fathers and mothers there. The majority of time was they felt like they weren't included in the school; they felt like their voices or concerns weren't being listed in the school.

I remember doing this native family night and only like a mom and a grandma came. But just listening to their story about their issues in the community. Just being that listening ear and again listening to that and really taking into consideration how they're feeling. Even the Latino parents, listening to them they're like we want more programs, we want more nights they're going to talk about these issues and nights where we're going to get together like this and eat food and what not.

So again it was just more of me just listening and taking it in and really taking into consideration like this is what they're feeling, this is what they're saying, so when that second phase of family night came around when they said that they'd never met the principal or they want to have questions answered, I brought [the principal] in for the second time.

Granted not a lot of them came but at least it was able to bring that out and it was like okay here's the person you can talk to or let's meet the principal, this is what she looks like. (April 21, 2011, interview)

Ms. Lourdes described these nights as a gathering of parents, aimed at providing them an opportunity to interact and build networks with each other and a school representative. Mainly, it was about providing parents with a space where their voices were heard. She took pride in providing this space and following up on parents' requests, like inviting the principal to the next family night event once she learned several parents had never met the principal. Recognizing that parents needed this space, according to Ms. Lourdes, took considerable time, and she explained that her ideas of what these nights

should be were a result of years of information gathering in the community and interactions with parents. When I asked her to reflect on the process of organizing these cultural nights, Ms. Lourdes shared:

Yes, in the beginning yeah, when I did the family nights. And so I remember the beginning, that was my, the main focus like going out and seeing what was around this community. Because it's like how can you be this resource when you don't know about this community? So I ended up going to the community center, talking to them, getting more information, just kind of seeing what's around, and just asking students and staff. Because a lot of staff live [here] too. And just seeing what's around here like how is this community, you know, how is it connected to the school and what does that look like. So I remember just the beginning part was just more getting that information like what is this community, what's the history. (April 21, 2011, interview)

Ms. Lourdes's time *going out* and learning about the community before initiating the family nights gave her an opportunity to build personal connections. Through these community interactions she identified a need, a space for parents to be heard. Under her leadership, the nights were parent focused and she even included parents in the planning of nights:

Like we had this Latino couple from the family from our first Latino family night they got involved, we had them do activities and they got to share a lot of their stories or their concerns. After that any issues like both of them, mom and dad, were like we want to be involved to help plan the next one and I was like great. So we kept in contact, we planned the next one. Their idea that winter was just to have a night where we just came together and just had food and music and just come together so we get to know [each other]. I was like we did that. I coordinated with the help of the receptionist we coordinated a night just to do that and it was really fun. Like it was a really big success. It was their idea, do you know what I mean. (April 21, 2011, interview)

However, this work that apparently took years to build was often times labeled unsuccessful by school staff because of poor attendance. As Ms. Lourdes explained:

Yeah. And I think that kind of falls into that parent involvement and that parent expectation. I felt like Community High too was all about numbers, numbers, numbers. Because every time I had a night they're like oh how many people and how big was it. And again, if you're reaching out, if one parent comes it's better than none. Like you're making a difference in a family; you're providing that space and that availability for them to ask questions and for them to get their questions answered and to hear their concerns and take it into consideration. You're making a difference right there.

I remember we had our African family night and it was pretty decent. We had a very decent number of families come out. And to someone, when I walked into the office, usually when I come in for work we have a partnership there and someone was like oh how did your family night go? I'm like it went real well; we had a good amount of people. She's like oh really? She said so and so said it wasn't really a success; you didn't have a lot of people. And I was just like what; like why would you say something like that? (April 21, 2011, interview)

Ms. Lourdes was well aware of the work it took to achieve this level of trust with parents and what she labeled a successful cultural and family night program. However, most schools that receive grant funding are required to report outcomes. Although Ms. Lourdes struggled to understand the school's focus on attendance, the reality is that most grants and educational funding are connected to the number of individuals served. During a meeting I attended with the First Century grant coordinator at the school, she shared with the group the documentation and reporting associated with the grant that had to account for every student participating in the various programs they offered. Additionally, at the KP program meetings parents were required to sign in each night they attended. Enrollment in the KP program was closely monitored, and the coordinator Sandra was concerned in the fall when enrollment had significantly dropped.<sup>20</sup> The focus

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<sup>20</sup> In the 2010-2011 academic year when I started my study the KP program had graduated close to 150 parents. In the fall of the 2011-2012 academic year enrollment in the program was down significantly at less than 50 parents.

on numbers was symptomatic of larger issues of educational accountability that did not consider the process of building personal relationships with individual families at a local school.

Nevertheless, Ms. Lourdes spoke passionately about the program as a first step in the right direction, and maintaining the focus of these nights on parents in her perspective was the appropriate way to build parent involvement within the school. Once she left in the middle of the spring 2011 semester, the program lost this significant component. The family nights are now framed as opportunities for parents to gain needed school information.

Through the suggestion of an Anglo<sup>21</sup> parent during a KP session, the nights were renamed *Multicultural Night* in the beginning of the fall 2011 semester in an attempt to welcome more parents and encourage cross-cultural interactions among parents. As I participated in the planning meeting for the first fall event, the staff suggested that it should be formatted as an informational session. The plan was to invite several staff members to speak at the event and introduce their services to parents, explain their roles within the school, and answer questions. The event looked and felt quite different from what Ms. Lourdes had described. Because of the need for interpreters, I noticed that the event isolated parents by ethnic groups and actually created a barrier to cross-cultural interactions. The invited staff only interacted with each other and parents had no opportunities to engage one on one with them. As my field notes reflect:

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term Anglo to refer to nonminority parents at the Common Ground school district. This is the term used by immigrant parents, which I decided to use mainly for the purposes of consistency.

I arrived early to meet with Sandra and help set up the room. Because of the after school programs we didn't get into the room until 5 p.m. The food was ordered from Sam's and set out on a table. The media center, where we met looks clean and organized for the event. Signs on the wall directing parents from different ethnic groups to certain locations in the room, because translators would be used. Several staff members began arriving, about 9 invited guests/staff members are present, they stand around together and talk. They then sat at a table together and continue interacting. Parents also begin to arrive, 3 different Hmong families sat at a table on one side of the media center. Latino parents sat at another table in other side of the media center. Translators for each group. (October 5, 2011, field notes)

In essence, parents arrived, listened to 2 hours of information, and left. Parents only spoke when asking questions to presenters. There were no opportunities for socializing, and the idea of a night where parents would come together to share food, listen to music, and engage in conversations seemed at a distant past given the new structure of the event. A similar situation occurred at Community High with the Knowledgeable Parent Program, which was initially promoted as a space for parents but later became dominated by the school's agenda.

### **Knowledgeable Parent Program (KP)**

Community High had been awarded a School Improvement Grant (SIG) and therefore received third-party recommendations for fund allocations. One area recommended was to improve parent involvement, which the school interpreted as parent education. In the year of the study, the school had initiated the Knowledgeable Parent (KP) program to help improve parent involvement. As Principal Jones highlighted in her interview:

... after we were identified as a school that was persistently low achieving an independent agency was brought in to do sort of like an outside evaluation of our school. And parent engagement was one of the factors

that they cited us on... And so that's why we did dedicate and set aside—allocate some of our school improvement [SIG] money that came from the grant to making sure that we funded Sandra's position so we had a full-time parent engagement coordinator. We were very careful about the selection of who we hired for that position and then again getting the KP class going and off the ground. (December 14, 2011 interview)

The KP classes became the hub for all things *parent* at Community High. It became the venue for any access to school parents. This quickly transformed the KP classes from their original goal of helping to support parents to a space for school announcements and information sharing. I attended 4 KP programs offered to high school and middle school parents; each lasted 7 weeks. The staff recruited parents to attend the KP program through school flyers and individual calls to each school parent. The program also received local attention in the media, and both a TV news segment and newspaper article promoted the program during the spring. The format of the program was to follow a curriculum (closely adapted from the national PIQE<sup>22</sup>); this included materials that were given to participants. The program was run by school staff facilitators whom introduced weekly topics and facilitated group activities aimed at helping parents understand general school procedures and their roles in helping support the educational achievement of their children. One of the initial sessions I attended during my first KP in the fall included a powerful parent group activity. Parents were given information about graduation and incarceration rates for different ethnic minorities. Parents would then write their children's name on the board and have to decide which ones would graduate. This was a powerful activity, which engaged parents in

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<sup>22</sup> Parent Institute for Quality Education is a program out of California that provides a class curriculum to help education parents about the U.S. educational system and how to best help support their children's education.

conversations, not only about school but also social barriers for minority achievement.

The first program maintained a close focus on the KP curriculum, and the majority of the session time was spent reading handouts and engaging in group discussions. The facilitators followed closely the instructions of the curriculum and spent considerable time on the activities such as the graduation-incarceration exercise. There were a few invited speakers in the first KP program, but by the final program I attended, speakers became the main focus of the sessions. The curriculum materials were provided as handouts, and time for group discussion became nonexistent.

Additionally, the amount of information provided to parents was substantial. Community High adopted a community school model that currently had over 100 partnerships and an overwhelming number of programs offered through these partnerships. Although the school made use of several communication strategies to announce programs and services—website announcements, newsletters, electronic billboard in front of the school, personal messages from the teacher to parents, flyers, brochures, posters in the hallways, etc.—it was hard to keep track of everything, and not all the information was provided bilingually. As a researcher, it was challenging to collect and code all this data because of the high volume. For example, a catalogue of resources titled *Northwest Community Resources Guide* had 12 categories (e.g., culturally specific programs, emergency services, education, and health care services) with over 20 resources listed per category. Parent meetings and the KP program sessions became a space to hand out information and showcase all the partnerships and resources the school had available.

Nevertheless, participation in the KP program and Multicultural Nights became the badge for parent involvement at Community High. Parents that participated were praised and recognized within the school. During the KP graduation ceremonies, the superintendent Mr. Marvin often expressed these sentiments, “I have worked in education for 42 years, and I have never been so proud than how I am of these parents graduating from this program... We thank you and your children will thank you.” Both the elementary school<sup>23</sup> principal and Principal Jones at two separate KP graduations reinforced these sentiments:

Next the elementary school principal spoke, he begins with a story about a parent requesting a meeting. He says he was not able to attend the meeting, but he asked the other staff how the meeting went... the staff said that unlike the past when parents were angry and mad about the school, these parents were calm, collected, and knowledgeable; I asked what happened and the staff said KP.... So I thank all of you for your participation in this important program. (May 17, 2011, KP graduation field notes).

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Principal Jones spoke, I am proud to be the principal of Community High and the mother of two “real” children. We are making history because of you! This is our second KP graduation. I would like to share with you some important pieces of information to show how important it is that you are part of your children’s education. Studies show that 70% of the time students are outside of school, spend time outside of school, so we believe that you are crucial to the success of your children. Researchers have identified trends, that when parents are involved in school students have higher grades and higher graduation rates, better school attendance, increased attendance, and better self-esteem. Higher parent participation reduces violence, drug use, less suspensions from school, etc. Parent involvement is more relevant than SES, in fact twice as important. I hope these facts help you understand why we are thankful for your involvement, and how it’s important that you are involvement, next time I see you at a

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<sup>23</sup> Although KP classes were different for the elementary school and the high school the graduation ceremony was together.

graduation will be in the football field when your children graduate from Community High. (March 29, 2011, KP graduation field)

These statements illustrate the high symbolic value placed in participation in the KP program. However, the prescriptive nature of program created a barrier for inclusion and consideration of parent's voices. As discussed previously, the agenda was set by school staff and often left no room for parent input. When parents attempted to resist the agenda and introduce their own discussion topics, the staff quickly pushed back by guiding parents back to the academic agenda and program curriculum. An interesting example of this was during the session in preparation for the principal night. Parents were asked to come up with a list of questions that would be given in advance to the principal to prepare for the principal Q&A night in the KP program. Please refer to Appendix A for the full list of original questions parents created.

Reviewing these questions provides insight into what parents valued in the opportunity to interact with the principal (see Appendix A). Most of the questions related to student safety, almost half of the questions were related to gangs and drugs use, and several addressed issues of racism and discrimination. The questions suggest that these issues did not go unnoticed by parents, and here they intended to take the opportunity to discuss them with the principal. However, as the facilitators reviewed the questions and eliminated a few (parents were told they could only ask 10 questions), the 9 questions related to drugs and gangs became 1 in the final draft. Parents were also encouraged to ask "some academic questions" which meant questions about the curriculum or classes offered at the school. Although parents did ask how low test scores affected their children, the facilitators suggested more questions that highlighted the new IB

curriculum. The following week during the principal Q&A, the focus was on promoting school programs and the advantages of having the IB curriculum. The question related to drugs and gangs was answered by highlighting the relationship with the local police, the presence of Mr. Edwards (Behavior Dean), and calls for parents to report any incidents observed. Questions related to the school persistently having low test scores were answered by highlighting the achievements of the school as an Art Magnet and IB school.

Although the cultural nights and KP program played a significant role in the parent involvement expectations at Community High, attendance of parent–teacher conferences was perhaps the greatest symbol of involvement. As reviewed earlier, many schools perceive parent–teacher conference as the ultimate indicator of parent involvement. The staff at Community High mentioned conference attendance often, and explained the value of parent–teacher interactions during conferences. However, as the data suggest, perceiving parent–teacher conferences as the holy grail of parent involvement can be problematic. The following section details the parent–teacher conference experience at Community High.

### **Parent–Teacher Conferences**

During my time at Community High I had the opportunity to participate in two parent–teacher conference events<sup>24</sup>, one of which I served as a Spanish interpreter. For most schools in the country, conferences twice a year is standard—once in the fall and once in the spring. In many cases, like at Community High, conferences are the only structured opportunity parents have to interact with teachers. Often, the parent–teacher

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<sup>24</sup> Community High held only two parent–teacher conference within an academic year, I attended the maximum number of conferences during the study.

conference is what defines parental involvement for most teachers and school administrators, and attendance by parents is expected. Ironically, most immigrant parents are simply unaware of the importance of this form of presence and the consequences of their absence (e.g., perceptions of disinterest of parents by teachers and staff). Even though parent–teacher conferences are highly valued as a visible form of parent involvement, such events only happen twice a year. As Mr. Edwards the Behavior Dean explains, 2 conferences a year does not seem nearly enough, “Make one [conference] 2 weeks before the end of every quarter, we have 4 quarters. You increase the number of contact with parents by 2, because we only do it twice a year now, which is not enough” (December 14, 2011 interview). Mr. Edwards suggests that schools should try to increase this valued interaction. Certainly doubling the amount of conferences a year would impact teacher contracts, and may not be as simple as Mr. Edwards suggests. Community High held 2 days of conferences each semester with day and evening hours. The evening conference was held in the school gym; teachers would roll their chairs filled with materials through the hallways. Desks were neatly arranged in rows. At the front door of the gym, a large desk was set up where parents could pick up student report cards and class schedules. Food was provided in the cafeteria. The conferences had several interpreters available for parents (e.g., Spanish, Hmong, and Somali). Due to the large number of Spanish speaking families, I served as an additional interpreter during the second conference. Parents would line up to meet with individual teachers, and direct contact between parent and teacher would usually last around 5 minutes. As an interpreter I had the opportunity to experience these interactions firsthand. The interaction consisted

of a casual and polite exchange, where teachers briefly explained their content area, their personal connection to the student, and then would say, “Do you have any questions for me?” Parents usually responded by asking how students behaved in the classroom and if they were doing well in class. This brief encounter had the added pressure of a line of other waiting parents. Conference days were busy and it was clear that Community High reflected a typical urban high school setting, highly diverse parent population with a lack of diversity among the teaching staff. National data indicate that, although 40% of students in public schools are categorized as minorities, the minority teachers only account for 13% of the teaching force (Fenwick, 2001).

Attendance at parent–teacher conferences was frequently mentioned in formal interviews with school staff and parent meetings as an indicator of parent involvement. However, the current format of conferences brings into question the true meaning of this brief contact. Although teachers and staff perceived conferences as an opportunity for parents to have meaningful interactions with teachers, the reality is that the current structure of parent–teachers conferences at Community High does not facilitate meaningful interactions. Take for example how Mr. Joe, the social studies teacher, describes conferences:

Conferences I love because I truly love talking. I’m definitely a talker and I truly do enjoy speaking with these students’ parents, guardians and I’ve met the grandparents and the whole spectrum and I really love doing that, but I think, and many teachers will agree, it’s not always the parents that you need to see at the conferences who show up. It’s not that you don’t want to talk to your A students’ parents, because you do, but you really wish that some of those D and F students would have their folks come in. You can have really meaningful conversations on that front as well. (May 11, 2011, interview)

It was difficult to understand how the 5-minute interactions at conferences would produce the “really meaningful conversations” Mr. Joe spoke of during his interview. His statement potentially speaks to the true advantage of conference attendance, which could be to fulfill the school’s expectation of parent involvement.

### **School Presence as Parent Involvement Expectation**

The importance of parent involvement was a frequent topic of discussion among staff at Community High. They labeled the school as in need of more parent involvement, and usually highlighted the lack of a formal parent group such as a PTA, attendance at school events and conferences as main indicators. School presence at Community High, like most high schools across the country, was the most recognized and valued form of parent involvement. The parent involvement expectation at Community High were communicated in spaces where parents were present, or expected to be present, for example at the KP sessions, multicultural nights and parent–teacher conferences.

In understanding parent involvement expectations, data from Community High suggest a strong association with school presence and interactions with school staff. When asked about parent involvement, a typical response from staff included school presence, as exemplified by Mr. Jorge one of the guidance counselors:

Well, we wish there was more parent involvement here than there is. It's difficult to oftentimes get parents involved to the extent that we would like them to get involved. We have nights here. We have Latino nights where we invite all the Latino parents in and we do a presentation about the school and about opportunities for their kids here. We have a Latino night and we have a night for the Asian parents and we have a night for the African ... We've tried to do some of those things and we have – for the older kids, particularly for the seniors – we have financial aid nights and college fairs and we try to bring the parents in as much as we can.

And it's always very disappointing to me that we can't get more parents involved than we do.... Sometimes it's sad but we really have a difficult time getting the parents more involved in their children's educations.  
(May 24, 2011, interview)

As Mr. Jorge indicates in his statement, parent involvement for many of the staff was constructed as parents attending school functions—particularly ones designed for parents, such as the cultural family nights. Low attendance at these events was framed as low parent involvement within the school. This substantiates Mrs. Lourdes's earlier statement regarding the parent nights, which expressed the school's perception of failure when the nights had low attendance. At Community High, not only did the staff expect presence, they were frustrated when parents did not show up. Consider the remarks by Principal Jones when she described the absence of parents at the school during a Department of Education visit, "...last week we had the department of education out here for a monitoring visit for a school improvement grant. The monitors wanted to speak to parents.... only 1 showed up that morning." Principal Jones described how they had recruited several parents to attend the meeting with the Department of Education representatives, and shared her disappointment of the turnout. Because the focus on presence was highly valued at the school, few staff recognized other ways in which parents could be involved. Ms. Lourdes, the Family Liaison when I first started my research, and as a Latina female had a different understanding of presence:

Mrs. Lourdes: ... they wanted to do these action teams to get more parents involved because someone mentioned I don't see the parents at the basketball game, you know. So and so's parents have never been to a basketball game and blah blah blah... So I explained to them, I told them like my parents only came to one or two of my athletic games and I played sports junior high through high school, it didn't make them not involved... So by saying a parent not coming to a sporting event and not,

that doesn't label them as a parent that's not involved. And I even said that you have to, if a parent's making sure a student's coming to school, that's parent involvement right there. Just the little things to make this kid come to school. I go you don't know what these families, some of these families come from households where the parents are working all the time, it doesn't mean that they're less involved in their school...(April 21, 2011, interview)

As Ms. Lourdes suggests in her alternative frame of parent involvement, the staff expectation of school presence was not based on a clear understanding of the realities of families. The staff often mentioned to me during interviews and informal conversations, the several events hosted throughout the year to encourage parent presence in the school to illustrate their attempts to reach out to parents. Perceptions of the lack of parent involvement by staff at Community High potentially reflect their personal experiences and understanding of involvement. Consider some of the responses staff gave when asked to describe their understanding of parent involvement:

Mrs. Heather (Guidance Counselor) Helping their students pick classes. Helping when they have questions, knowing who to contact and contacting the person. Showing up and saying I want a meeting with this teacher, my kid's having a problem. If they're noticing things at home that they think are also going on at school that they're contacting us. Being a part of the learning about the college process and being an active part of that process with their child. Taking them on college tours. Coming to the college and informational nights that we hold. Being part of PTA, I don't even think we have a PTA here but being part of some type of organization at school where they get to help make decisions. Being an active role, almost like they go to school with their kid. Not really, not that I want a helicopter parent, there's a really fine line with that.

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Mrs. Elizabeth (Social Worker): In a school environment parental involvement is relationships with the people that work with your kids. So if I'm a parent and I send my kid to school, do I know who to call if my kid were sick, if my kid was failing grades, if the teachers were not reasoning to my kids' needs, who could I pick up the phone and call. I mean that's, to me, is being involved enough to know that if I needed

something for my child I could call someone and get that. That to me is parental involvement.

These statements illustrate traditional expectations of parent involvement, which place high value on school presence and interactions with school staff. For both Mrs. Heather and Mrs. Elizabeth, these descriptions of involvement are reported as simple tasks and acceptable expectations for any school parent. However, for many immigrant families, these simple tasks present significant barriers. Take, for example, Mrs. Elizabeth's expectation that parents pick up the phone and call the school: For many immigrant families, this act is extremely complex because of language barriers. Simply picking up the phone is not an option when schools have limited or no bilingual staff. Additionally, Mrs. Heather's expectation that parents help students pick classes and apply for college is unrealistic when many immigrant parents are unfamiliar with the U.S. educational systems or pathways to higher education. Constructing parent involvement this way only creates an environment where immigrant parents will fail to meet expectations and consequently be perceived as uncaring or deficient (Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001). In some cases the staff was aware that traditional views of parent involvement needed to be reevaluated and adjusted when working immigrant and minority families. Principal Jones seemed to recognize the need to reimagine parent involvement with immigrant and minority families at the school in her remarks regarding parent involvement:

Mrs. Jones: Parental involvement can mean that they just are really on top of what's going on here because we do a good job sending out newsletters and postcards and mailings that they read. It can be a parent who's on the computer every day checking their kid's grades and attendance. It can be a parent who's at all the athletic events or all the music events. It can be a

parent that's on committees. But that's, to me, a sort of outdated or at this point mythical definition of parent involvement is the classic like PTA parent. I think that there's about 18,000 different ways to be an involved parent and we just have to help parents redefine some of those new ways to be involved and actually give them permission that that's okay. You know you're working two jobs, you have other kids, if you're not going to be an involved parent by being on the PTA or whatnot, that's fine. There are still a million other ways you can be an involved parent and be just as supportive of your child's education as if you were, you know, holding a place on a committee. And that's not to disrespect or to put down the importance of committee membership and committee attendance, but that's just to me one way of many to be an involved parent.

Principal Jones acknowledged that traditional parent involvement expectations that only focused on school presence were outdated; however, I did not witness any signs of a reimagined approach. In fact, the data from Community High provide evidence that traditional approaches are still very much part of the school's expectation. However, updating the established ideologies can often be challenging, as we notice from Mrs. Lourdes' experience when she attempted to define parent involvement more broadly by including *the little things* (e.g., making sure kids come to school). Mrs. Lourdes was one of the few Latina staff members and, although she often challenged the established parent involvement expectations, I failed to recognize any result in her efforts. Parent presence was unquestionably still very much a part of parent involvement at Community High.

### **Understanding the Role of Space in Parental Involvement Constructs**

My time at Community High suggests that *where* matters. Space played a significant role in identifying the attitudes and ideologies surrounding parent involvement at Community High. Understanding the role of space in parent involvement provides a window into *how* parent involvement expectations are communicated and enacted. It was clear that Community High created several spaces to welcome parents into the school,

such as the family nights and KP program, but these were spaces controlled by the school. Consequently, immigrant parents entering these spaces had limited power to impact the message or forms of engagement. My experience at Community High reinforces what other scholars have already suggested when school's set the agenda for such interactions (Fine, 1993). Immigrant parents' potential lack of understanding of the U.S. educational system and language barriers positioned them, within these formal school spaces, as perceptually deficient. In theorizing about parent involvement expectations at Community High, which value school presence and support, it is important to understand the role of social and cultural capital in constructing deficit descriptions of families at the school. DiMaggio (1982) highlighted that there are specific forms of capital that provide students and families with access to needed information for successful school outcomes. Some of the significant school capital scholars have identified as influential to school success are: socioeconomic statuses (Lareau, 2000); cultural identity (Valdés, 1996); perceptions of the purpose of education (Dyson, 2001); and English proficiency (Blackledge, 2001). These scholars suggest that having or accessing this valued school capital allows families the advantage of being perceived as caring and supportive of their child's education. Consequently, when families fail to access or embody the valued school capital they are described as lacking or deficient. As Whitehouse and Colvin (2001) explain, "marginalized families that are considered diverse with regard to language, culture, ethnicity and class are particularly vulnerable to representations grounded in a deficit discourse. Diversity gives way to difference when we understand and represent these families as lacking" (p. 212). Understanding these

theoretical frameworks allows us to better understand the reality at Community High. The findings at Community High revealed that school presence and support for school administrative decisions were accepted as valued, when immigrant families failed to embody this capital by not attending school events and meetings or questioning administrative decisions (e.g., 6<sup>th</sup> grade class move to the high school building) they were perceived as disinterested or disruptive.

In addition, the population at Community High had changed significantly in the last 3 decades, as presented earlier the school is one of the most diverse high schools in the state, the school continued to rely on traditional approaches for parent involvement. This approach to parent involvement only reinforced a deficit model of working with immigrant families, where schools believe the challenges of working with families can be overcome by teaching them school expectations and procedures for involvement and participation (Edwards & Warin, 1999). As earlier descriptions suggest, Community High adopted a one-way model of parent involvement, where several events were organized to provide parents with school information, understanding of the school culture, and accepted forms of parent behavior (e.g., KP program). Certainly the idea that parents take on a supportive role rather than participate in decision-making is not unique to Community High. Auerbach (2010) also reported from her work with school administrators that most principals welcomed and valued parent participation but were less welcoming of what they called *professional parents* that took on more active roles in councils (p. 740). In many schools, parental involvement is approached with mixed messages. Although most schools seek parent support and expect their participation in

school events, this usually does not imply an invitation to question the school or take on roles of decision makers. Although scholars have argued that meaningful parent participation can only come as a result of comprehensive parent participation at all levels of the school (Anderson, 1998), in most cases school administrators rarely welcome or desire the presence of *professional parents*. My findings suggest that potentially at Community High parent involvement expectations positioned parents in supportive roles, such as attending events like the family fun night and acceptance of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade move. I speculate that parent involvement was welcomed, and highly desired by staff, as long as it followed school's expectations for involvement.

The expectation of presence at Community High, through the attendance of school events, was not surprising. In their study with Latino immigrant parents in two elementary schools, Carreón et al. (2005) suggests that “parental engagement needs to be understood through parents’ presence in schooling, regardless of whether that presence is in a formal school space or in more personal, informal spaces, including those created by parents themselves” (p. 465). Most studies that report on parent involvement support the understanding that parents and school staff have differing notions of school presence (Lareau, 2000; Valdés, 1996). At Community High, the expectations of presence also suggested the staff’s lack of understanding of the cultural and social reality of parents in the school. Rather than reflecting on school practices to engage parents, most of the staff blamed parents for failing to be involved and attend school events. As Bourdieu (1986) recognized through his theoretical constructs of social and cultural capital, schools become spaces where social inequalities are reproduced. The staff at Community High

had normalized the forms of involvement based on traditional notions of parent involvement. As Bourdieu (1986) explains with his theory of cultural capital, schools possess their own set of capital that are recognized and valued, and require students and families to “activate” in order to have a successful schooling experience. At Community High the efforts to reach out to immigrant parents were focused on changing parents; providing parents with what the school viewed as necessary information to conform to acceptable parent behavior. In essence, parent initiatives reinforced school norms and left little room for parents to negotiate their own interests within the school.

Understanding the role of space in parent involvement expectations also provides an opportunity to understand the ability of individuals, such as immigrant parents, to access and embody capital and access the benefits of membership in *closure group* (Coleman, 1988). For example, the family nights were originally initiated to encourage minority parent participation, and provide welcoming spaces for the diverse families that existed within the school community. However, it seemed that the only space where parents were once the focus had quickly become another venue to provide scripted school information. These nights initially had been opportunities for parents to access a social capital that would grant membership in valued closure groups (Coleman, 1988). As the comments from Mrs. Lourdes suggest, the night was perceived by parents as an opportunity to build networks with each other and some of the school staff. The informal environment favored conversations where trust and support were achieved without predesigned strategies. Additionally, the focus on attendance by the school was frustrating to Mrs. Lourdes; she believes gaining trust among diverse parent communities

was significant even with small numbers. For Mrs. Lourdes, entry and acceptance started with only one parent. Some scholars support Mrs. Lourdes beliefs of building trust as a first step, “high-quality human relationships are strongly predictive of whether or not a school can gather itself together to get better” (Payne, 2008). As Blase (1991) explains, schools deal with a variety of external forces including government mandates that impact their daily operations. Therefore, understanding parent involvement within a school context requires understanding of how different individuals and agencies within the institution influence and impact each other. Nevertheless, in practice schools need to report numbers and little consideration is given to the potential of one individual to impact an entire community.

The KP sessions were also being transformed and now reflected a stale and traditional embodiment of parent roles, by positioning them as passive receivers of information. Where once parents felt ownership of the space, now the school had reframed the nights to push their own agendas and valued forms of involvement. My feeling during the early sessions of the KP program was that parents were building a powerful understanding of how they could support each other and create the change needed for all their children to graduate. However, the school staff agendas became the curriculum and parent discussions quickly vanished through the inclusion of more invited speakers. The belief that parents lacked needed information to properly support their children and the school, failed to recognize the school’s lack of information about parents and their backgrounds. Several scholars have reported on the important resources parents can bring to school (Auerbach, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 1995); however, at Community

High there were no informational sessions for school staff to learn about the vast resources parents had.

Other studies have reported similar findings of schools essentially attempting to hijack parent spaces. Delgado-Gaitan's (1991) study with Spanish-speaking parents in a California school district illustrates how a school presents and promotes involvement can clash with the realities of what parents experience during engagement. Her field notes on a parent meeting reflect the dynamics of parent–school interactions:

The principal took the floor again and recommended that the group become a fund-raising organization to help the school purchase instructional materials because the school district was low in funds. The parents, however, quickly protested about their group being relegated to a fund-raising group (p. 37).

Here Delgado-Gaitan documents an interaction where parents came together and organized a group with differing goals from school administrators. Although the group was welcomed and encouraged, when interactions with administrators occurred, the message was that parent involvement include fundraising activities. Parents in her study resisted and maintained their original position as a group providing a “support system for each other” rather than advancing the priorities of schools. What is significant is that school staff discourses that promote reimaged parent involvement initiatives nevertheless continue to reinforce traditional approaches during the implementation process. It became clear to me that at Community High the school staff perceived the lack of parent involvement as lack of school information; thus, if parents knew more about the school and what it provided, parents would become more involved. Consequently, the

purpose of interactions between staff and parents was one of information giving, from staff to parents.

Another important example illustrated by my experience in the KP program was how staff perceived parents attending the sessions. Participation in the program, and access to this important *closure group* provided significant capital to parents. As detailed earlier, participation in programs such as the KP program granted parents the status of being supportive, of both their children and the school. Lareau and Horvat (1999) have suggested that parents perceived as supporting the school are accepted as “good” and those that resist are viewed as “problematic” (Carreón et al., 2005). Principal Jones earlier remarks during the KP graduation made a connection between parent participation in the KP program and student graduation. Her statement highlights parent roles and responsibility within the educational achievement of their children, and communicates the school’s expectation of accepted forms of involvement. Additionally, by attaching her statement to references to “research” Principal Jones brings unquestioned authority to her message, one that implies parents are significantly responsible for their children’s school success. However, it simultaneously ignores the well-documented research on institutionalized disadvantages minorities face within the school system (Lareau, 2000; Ogbu, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Zhou & Bankston III, 1994). For example, Minnesota public schools have persistently had one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation. Although Minnesota schools rank among the top nationwide, the reality is that students of color consistently score lower than their white peers and data suggest the gap is only widening in recent years. Principal Jones’s statement and research reference spotlight parent

responsibilities, but fail to recognize the school's responsibility. In connecting KP participation to student achievement in her graduation remarks she also ignores significant research that document the challenges some minority parents face in parent involvement. The barriers for school presence have been extensively discussed in the parent involvement literature (Kim, 2009; Perreira et al., 2006; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Turney & Kao, 2009). There may be a variety of reasons why parents are unable to attend the program, from work responsibilities to language barriers (e.g., there were no Hmong or Somali language KP classes). Finders and Lewis (1994) work with Latino and low-income Anglo parents also suggests that, "for many parents, their own personal school experiences create obstacles to involvement. Parents who have dropped out of school do not feel confident in school settings...this situation is compounded by language barriers and lack of written literacy skills" (p. 51). The opportunities provided by Community High for parent involvement assumed parents already possessed the school capital necessary to navigate these spaces as expected.

The data also suggest that, even when events were promoted as parent spaces such as the Multicultural Nights, they quickly transformed into other venues to advance the school's agenda for involvement through sharing of school procedural information. Space mattered in the context of Community High because it signaled that parent involvement occurred inside the school building. It also mattered because space dictated the types of interactions possible, in the formal informational sessions the school provided the staff were typically positioned as the holders of knowledge about school and student achievement. Parents, on the other hand, were typically passive receives of this

information. Community High, like many other schools, must recognize that the background of families is an important factor in both the development and potential success of parent involvement programs. For example, Vazquez-Nuttall, Li, and Kaplan (2006) report that, “...the recent immigrant Hmong parents should be seen in the sociocultural context of their transition from an oral, agricultural society, to a postindustrial society with very different languages and customs” (p. 90). Interactions between school staff and Hmong families consequently can be significantly different, for example Hmong parents may not ask questions to staff and engage in passive listening, be reluctant to shake hands and avoid eye contact; all these actions can be linked to Hmong cultural norms for interactions. The expectation of urban school staff members, which are based on American cultural norms, may likely be in conflict with Hmong cultural norms. Therefore, as Vazquez-Nuttall et al. (2006) explain, “these mismatches often create problems in a multicultural and multilingual urban school setting” (p. 90).

As I detail in this chapter, interactions among immigrant parents and supporting school staff at Community High were greater than with teachers. Although the supporting staff would talk about the importance of parent–teacher interactions, opportunities to interact with teachers were extremely limited. For example, parent–teacher conferences were frequently mentioned during KP sessions and informational nights as an important resource for parents, and most of the staff including teachers mentioned it during interviews as significant part of parent involvement. However, it was difficult to imagine conferences as opportunities for meaningful interactions as many teachers and school administrators claim; the structure and setup of conference events

simply did not lend themselves to such opportunities. Although symbolic, it simply was not possible to achieve the status of meaningful conversations during a 5-minute interaction. It seems that the only recognizable benefit of parent–teacher conferences is for parents to provide the perception of caring to teachers with the hopes that this will in turn benefit their children. Additionally, I attended several other school events, and in most cases Sofia, the bilingual family liaison, was present to represent the Health Clinic and serve as interpreter. In some cases school staff members were present, but rarely teachers. Although parent presence in these spaces was frequent it was unlikely a recognized form of parent involvement, because it was invisible to teachers and the school staff working outside the space.

The data suggest that parents at Community High had limited access to teachers, and in fact, most contact with the school was through interactions with supporting staff. This finding is significant because it indicates that parent–staff relationships are actually the key to a better understanding of parent involvement. Studies that focus only on parent involvement through the lens of teacher relationships can potentially be only presenting part of the story. Absence of scholarly work about parent interactions with supporting staff (e.g., guidance counselors, testing coordinators, family liaisons, social workers, school physiologists) within the parent involvement paradigm suggests a significant gap in the current literature; which tends to focus on parent–teacher relationships to understand parent involvement (Carreón et al., 2005; Paratore et al., 1994; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Essentially, my findings at Community High suggest that understanding what it means to be an involved parent comes from interactions with supporting staff in formal

school spaces. Parent involvement expectations were being communicated and enacted in spaces where teachers were absent.

### **Where Have All the Teachers Gone?**

Unfortunately, the current school structure provides parents with limited access to teachers. In fact, during KP sessions, parents were told that if they wanted access to teachers they should schedule meetings or attend conferences. Staff frequent suggestions to schedule meetings with teachers and school staff in order to be involvement tend to minimize the additional challenges faced by non-English speaking parents. For example, on one occasion a Latina mother requested a meeting with Mr. Edwards to share her concern with student piercing in the school. According to the mother, her daughter had an infection from a belly piercing that was done by another student in the school. A meeting between a school staff member and a non-English speaking parent required considerable work; the mother had to contact Sofia who then had to arrange the schedule with Mr. Edwards, and subsequently had to also be available himself to interpret. Even in a community model school that provides additional services to students and families, there were still no spaces to access teachers other than their classrooms and parent-teacher conferences. Although the school attempted to promote teachers as partners, the reality was that teachers were distant and hard to reach. When I suggested inviting teachers to a multicultural night event during a planning meeting (field notes 10/5/2011), the staff explained that teachers could not work more than 40 hours a week, and requesting them to stay after school hours would violate contract rules. It was also mentioned at one of the KP sessions that if teachers were asked to stay after regular school hours they would have

to be paid and funding was not available. After reviewing some of the teacher contracts in the state, I realized that duty day and hours vary by district. In some cases school districts listed specific times for parent-teacher conferences and any teacher responsibilities outside the established duty day hours. At Community High the contract specified that a duty day was 7 3/4 consecutive hours, but that principals could call meetings beyond the duty day hours. In any case, I speculate that there has been a cultural shift in schools in the last decade that have impacted teacher behavior, and may have resulted in lower morale among the teaching profession. The image of a dedicate teacher staying after school and being actively involved in all aspect of student life is less likely given the fragile structure of the current educational system. At the KP program meetings, Family Resource Room, Health Center and Multicultural Nights it was staff members (e.g., testing coordinator, guidance counselor, family liaisons, disciplinary dean) and not teachers that were present.

When parents prepared questions for the Q&A session with the principal, as detailed earlier, one of the most interesting questions was regarding creating more opportunities for parent-teacher interactions. Parents clearly expressed a desire to have more contact with teachers (question 19), a request that was also expressed at other parent events. During a summer parent meeting, one of the Latino mothers shared her thoughts regarding the issue of creating more opportunities to interact with teachers at the school:

Para empezar, como ahora que vine las clases, no ya regulares. Yo pienso lo primero que no debe de (inaudible 0:08:51.1) es hablar; tener una relación mas cercano con los maestros para que lo conocen a uno y también conocerlo y sepan los maestros que uno tienen interés en sus

propios hijos. Yo pienso que eso es una manera buena de empezar una relación.<sup>25</sup>

Interpreter: I think now that school is getting close to start again, I feel that it would be good for us to get to know the teacher, meet the teacher, and make sure that they know us; not just that one day. Just be more involved so that they know that we're interested in our children's academics and that we're there with them. They have to know us, that we're there. (July 26, 2011, Parent Meeting)

Some of the staff recognized the value of interactions with teachers; consider what Mr. Edwards shared during my interview with him:

By having those social gatherings where they [parents] don't feel intimidated and it's not something that they have to talk punitive about when it comes to their kid. As long as they don't have to talk about that Johnnie with an F, and you're just socializing, got your name tag on and you're walking around sipping on punch, eating some spaghetti, chicken or something. And then that way they don't feel intimidated. And then, once they feel comfortable with that parent, be it that parent is vocal or not, then at least you've met with some parents. You're not going to hit everything, there's nothing 100%. But the fact is we'll get more parents involved the more teachers involve the parents, if that happens. (December 14, 2011, interview)

Here Mr. Edwards points to the benefits of social interactions as opportunities to build meaningful relationships among parents and teachers, a space where formal school talk can be avoided and social talk can be utilized to build personal connections and trust.

The data from Community High suggest that opportunities for interactions with teachers only occurred if teachers made efforts outside their designated duties. Because Mr. Edwards made himself available to parents outside school hours, his belief was that teachers should take similar steps—a fact he validated to me by saying his personal cell

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<sup>25</sup> I made a personal decision to keep data sections with interpreter translations as is. Utilizing the interpreter translation for data analysis and discussion help provide a more authentic experience of the event participants.

phone was included on the business card he gave to parents, and they had contacted him during out-of-school hours to report issues. Mr. Edwards was frustrated by teachers' attitudes that their job ended at 3:30 p.m., and they hide behind their contracts to limit their availability to parents. Although contacting Mr. Edwards directly would likely be impossible for non-English speaking parents, his belief that part of his job was to make adjustments to his schedule to accommodate the schedules of parents speaks to his understanding of the community at the school. Only individual efforts by teachers resulted in closer connections with parents. For example, Mr. Gonzales the ELL teacher and ELL Coordinator shared his personal strategies for connecting with parents, which included doing home visits:

I do and when it requires it and when there's a need, definitely. I've done that for a number of families who either the students—we've had it where the student wasn't coming to school. Okay, well let's go find out what's going on so I had somebody cover my class and I went to the house with our social worker and you know, "Hey, what's going on? Why—how can we help?" I've had conversations with parents who are like, "I'd really like to come and talk with you but I can't." "You know, we'll work in—when can I come over to your house? I'll print everything, I'll bring it over to your house and we can sit down and talk about it." "Oh, that'd be awesome, Mr. Martinez."

So I've done that where I've printed grades and their transcripts and we've gone over there and I explained it to them and talked with them about it and I mean, those are things that I've done in order to make that connection but to get that parent involved and to say, "All right. Let's work together. Let's help everybody be successful." And I'll continue to do it because I just know that it's one of the most effective ways to establish those relationships but then get that vine and help students be successful.  
(April 26, 2011, interview)

For Mr. Gonzales, these efforts had significant results in building his rapport with immigrant parents and creating the forms of relationships policy makes advocate between

parents and teachers. Consider his remarks in reflecting on the impact of his efforts to reach out to parents:

... the first time that you get invited to a Quinceanera, you know that you made an impact with that family and that student, you know, to know that as a teacher, you've been invited. Or the first time that—yeah, the first time that parent comes, you see that parent out in the community someplace and they recognize you and they're willing to have that—I mean, they want to make that connection to you because you're the teacher like, "Hey, Gonzales, how's it going?" I mean, just those small subtle connections with families make it—those are the ones that, you know, that you look at to say, "Okay, well I did make a difference." (April 26, 2011, interview)

Although teachers have traditionally been viewed as the bridge between home and school, and the key to increasing parent involvement, it became clear to me while I was at Community High that access to teachers could only be during regular school hours or scheduled parent-teacher conferences. At Community High interactions with supporting staff, and not teachers, played a key role in building parent involvement within the school. I spoke about this with Principal Jones about parent's limited access to teachers:

MA: So I guess my question is how do they kind of work with—because it seems like when we talk about parent engagement and parent involvement we're talking about teachers and parents. But I feel like in this school setting what I've observed is a lot more of those connections are made with the staff rather than the teacher.

Principal Jones: Yeah.

MA: I mean the teacher might see the parent during parent teacher conference and that might be their only contact with the parent.

Principal Jones: Yeah. So I think that fits right in with what we were talking about how it's up to us as a school to provide alternate creative ways for parents to be involved other than the traditional ones. And that is definitely a wave that you've picked up on, is by having guidance counselors, school psychologists, school social worker, you know, a full range of staff in the guidance office. They often are the first point of contact for parents. And you're right, a teacher might say I've never seen

Maria's dad, I've never talked to Maria's dad. But then you ask a school guidance counselor or a school social worker and they're like, "Yeah, I've talked to them several times." You know so they often are our first and most important point of entry. (December 14, 2011, interview)

Here Principal Jones frames supporting staff interactions with parents as an important asset to the school, one that provides alternative pathways to connect to the school.

### **Impact of Teacher Access**

Traditionally parent involvement studies tend to focus on the parent–teacher relationship. This is potentially the result of scholarly connections between parent involvement and student achievement. In this context teachers obviously become central to investigations of successful parent involvement. However, findings from this study challenge these notions and highlight the importance of supporting staff in fostering effective parent involvement. Although some studies have focused on school administrators (Auerbach, 2010; Epstein, 1987; Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 2006), principals (Peterson & Ladky, 2007), parent liaisons (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007), and school psychologists (Christenson, 1995; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999), within the parent involvement paradigm these are rare. And such studies focus investigation on the impact of these positions in creating and implementing successful programs; few detail how interactions with school administrators, principals, and school psychologists impact parent perceptions of schools and involvement. At Community High interactions with teachers were limited, thus parents relied mostly on supporting staff to build their understanding of parent involvement. Although I acknowledge that constructs of parent

involvement can, and most likely are also, constructed through out-of-school interactions, the data from this study present a unique lens in understanding the role of teachers.

Furthermore, the expectation that parents are responsible for involvement resulted in the unspoken expectation that parents also make the necessary accommodations to be involved. For example, requesting language interpreters when needed. The school frequently reminded parents they could request interpreters in any language, although the school had a large population of Hmong and Somali families, access to these language interpreters were mostly observed during conference days. Language barriers were often dismissed at the school because of the assumed access to interpreters and bilingual materials. However, Sofia was the only full time bilingual supporting staff at the high school<sup>26</sup>, and she divided her time between her role as family liaison and Health Center coordinator. Language barriers had significant impact on everyday school procedures. For example, Sofia would often spend considerable time tracking down teachers that left messages for Latino families. Teachers would call parents and leave messages in English. The parents would then call Sofia to say they received a message from the school but they could not understand what was said. In most cases parents had multiple children in the school and even in the district. Sofia would then have to look up the schedule for all the children and email all the teachers to track down who contacted the family. Once the teacher was located; she would then have to get the message, contact the family, and again the teacher to facilitate the communication. This process could take days and was obviously ineffective. These findings suggest again that parents are responsible for

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<sup>26</sup> Mr. Gonzales, the ESL teacher and coordinator was also a fulltime bilingual Spanish-English staff member. He also helped interpret for parents during meetings and parent-teacher conferences.

making the accommodation for involvement, in this case finding ways to translate the teacher information. Could the teacher have contacted Sofia directly in the school to send the message to parents, saving valuable time? I content that these situations only distant teachers from parents, and constructed a parent involvement ideology where teacher absence was accepted.

Findings from this study potentially indicate a greater need to understand the consequences of limited teacher–parent interactions. What happens when parents have limited access to teachers? And how does it impact parents’ understanding of involvement? At Community High I speculate that the consequences of limited access to teachers resulted in parent’s relying on school staff to understand their roles within the school. Although the school welcomed parents through several school-sponsored events they rarely included teachers. In the numerous events I attended at the school, parent–teacher relationships were often mentioned as an important way parents could stay connected to school. But I was left wondering how these relationships could be built. In piecing together parent involvement ideologies at Community High, it was clear that efforts for involvement were the responsibility of parents and not teachers. Parents were expected to attend events, but not teachers. The absence of teachers potentially reinforces the perception that teachers are the authority in school and parents have little room to negotiate their needs within the school, and much less the curriculum. Consequently, parent involvement was framed as a parent initiative.

## Chapter 5

### Parent Involvement Expectations:

#### Online Access as the New Form of School Presence

Schools are filled with parent expectations: homework support, attendance at parent–teacher conferences and school events, and communication with supporting staff and teachers. In the case of Community High the expectation was changing, not in response to the new diverse student population, but to the new technologies available to schools and the personal experiences of staff. Of particular interest was the new expectation of online presence, where parent involvement now includes the use of online resources. As Principal Jones mentioned, going online to check kids' grades and attendance by use of the School View<sup>27</sup> was strongly associated with parent involvement, and the data suggest this has become a new normalized form of involvement. In fact, accessing School View was a significant part of the parent involvement at Community High. Like many schools nationwide online resources for parents have become commonplace, however for some families it only serves to distance them further from schools and reinforce even more misconceptions of involvement. This chapter will discuss in further detail the role of online resources in shaping parent involvement views and how messages of the importance of these resources were communicated to parents during interactions at the school.

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<sup>27</sup> School View is an online resource parents can access to check information from the teacher (e.g., grades, assignments, attendance). In some schools this resource is called *Parent Portal*. This has become a common resource for schools today and is not unique to Community High.

Although computers and the Internet have become mainstream, they are relatively new, only existing in the last two decades. Today most schools have websites that provide a variety of information from daily school activities to important announcements to the public, students and parents. Additionally most schools have different versions of School View, an online site where teachers provide, for example, information on class assignments, student grades and attendance records. Parents can then access the site to view information on their children. The use of online resources has become so normalized that it has now transferred into an excepted form of school presence by parents regardless of visible barriers for many families. Take for example Ferrara and Ferrara's (2005) statement in reporting a study in a teacher training program, "web site access are becoming increasing available to all homes in the community as the cost of computers and Internet access decreases" (p. 81). The reality is that the cost still presents a significant barrier to a large number of low-income families. Furthermore, for some immigrant families where cost is not a problem a variety of additional barriers could still be present; for example adequate knowledge in operating computers and navigating websites, and language. Nevertheless, narratives from school staff at Community High suggest that these skills are necessary if not required for parents to be considered involved. Consider my conversation with Mr. Joe, a social studies teacher at the school, when I asked how he identified an involved parent he responded:

Mr. Joe: That's a good question. There's two ways that I do that. One way is the formal way. If I need to get a hold of a parent, I know whether or not they are, I don't want to say abiding by, but at least being respectful of my expectations by whether or not I can get a hold of them. If I try four or five different times to get a hold of the parent via email, telephone, whatever mode of communication I used and I can't hear back from them,

something's not right. The other way is just keeping an eye on trends, general trends. For example, if I have a student who has an F for 3 weeks in a row and their grade is sitting on an F and I don't get a phone call or I don't get an email that's telling me that somebody's not checking in.

MA: How do they check in? You're saying for a week. Do you give grades out every week?

Mr. Joe: We have School View available that you can access online. You have the logon information. You can check your student's grade live at any moment, pull it up; even if a teacher has just updated it, it will refresh. Even for our families who don't have Internet and access for computers at home, which is a real possibility, you check that at any public library with internet access. I really do think that you need to make the sacrifice to check; you've got to check. I could call home every day if I want to, but I can't make you have that conversation with your kid.

MA: So you're saying that a student has an F for 3 weeks and the parent doesn't contact you or if they did then you would know that this parent is involved.

Mr. Joe: ... can things happen where you can lose touch for 3 weeks; absolutely, so I don't like to jump to conclusions but at the same time you get to know the trends and the patterns that you see with certain students and their household that their living in....Some people have actually told me, "You can't really tell people what your expectations are of them, they're the kids' parents." I know that's a little bit more bold than I guess some people are willing to be, but I don't down talk anybody and I just think that in order to be successful it's a team scenario. It's not just the student, it's not just the teacher, and it's not just at home either; it's a combination of all three and until we figure that out, we're going to be in a lot of trouble for a long time. I don't mean just here, I mean nationwide.

(May 11, 2011, interview)

Here Mr. Joe makes it clear that routine access to the school's online resources are part of the parent involvement expectations, in fact for him it is a critical cultural capital parents must embody in order to successfully support their children and be recognized as involved. These sentiments were not exclusive to Mr. Joe, several staff members (e.g., guidance counselor, social worker, testing coordinator, etc.) mentioned

online resources in conversations and presentations. It was clear that the preferred method of communication within Community High was through email.

Furthermore, online access has now become the new form of school presence, rather than physically being in the school parents can be ‘present’ by logging in daily or weekly. In fact, this is now the new form of recognized parent involvement, and alternative path for many families; however, it continues to be a form of involvement that lacks depth or meaningful interaction. Parents are still passive receives of school information through the School View system, and the school continues to control and set the agenda for information sharing. This highlights the school’s approach of one-way communication that values the school’s agenda and ignores the potential contribution of parents. It may be that online presence has become the alternative to truly examining ways in which schools can engage with families to meaningfully collaborate in the educational achievement of their children.

On several occasions, parents showed me that they resisted this form of communication through their concern with language barriers and computer knowledge, a consideration that was always quickly dismissed by staff by offers of interpreters. The message of online access was strongly present in several interactions with parents. Consider this exchange that took place at the Multicultural Night between Mai a Hmong mother and Beth the school testing coordinator:

Mai (Hmong mother, through interpreter): Every time the son is coming home is not doing homework, she is not seeing homework; so she wants to know what is going on why she is not seeing homework?

Beth: I would check with individual teachers. I can guarantee that there is Language A or English homework on a daily basis, math homework on a

daily basis. They have foreign language every other day there is homework. And also, do you have access to Power School? Which is our online system where parents can check the kids' grades, assignments, etc.?

Mai (through interpreter): They don't know how to use a computer and don't know how to go online to check anything

Beth: Heather is coming in later tonight, ask her and she can give her the information...All parents though please come to conferences, please talk to your kids teacher ask them these questions because there is homework being assignment and it is required of students

Mai (through interpreter): Sometimes you have conferences, parents we are very busy so that is why we can't come

Beth: Call, email all teachers have voicemail all teachers have email.

Mai (through interpreter): [laughs a little] We don't speak English.

Beth: There are interpreters to help.

(October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Multicultural Night Presentation)

In this 2-minute exchange Beth fails to recognize the resources of the immigrant communities and the realities in which they navigate their relationships with schools.

Beth's message was clear, online access is crucial for parents at Community High to successfully support their children. Mai's resistance by identifying herself as a parent without access or knowledge of how to navigate online resources was simply dismissed.

Even after it was established that Mai could not make use of the Internet, Beth still presented that as an alternative for not attending conferences. What Beth failed to recognize was that Mai needed an alternative pathway to communication with teachers and the schools. Although the school made computers available to parents in the Family Resource Room and even provided computer instructors to help parents, none were bilingual and neither were the school's online resources. Beth minimized the language

barriers by offering interpreters; however, the reality was that access to interpreters was not easy particularly for the Hmong and Somali community (e.g., no onsite Hmong or Somali interpreter). This exchange potentially shaped Mai's perception of her role as an *involved parent* and she never returned to the KP meetings.

Although it would be easy to be critical of Beth's behavior, the truth is that her personal understanding of parent involvement was limited to her own reality and perceptions. In many of the conversations and interviews I conducted with staff I asked about their personal experiences with parent involved as students and as parents. In most cases teachers and staff reported personal experiences that mirrored their current descriptions of parent involvement. Mrs. Heather, the social worker, shared a story about meeting with the principal and teacher when her child had an issue at school. In her descriptions of parental involved she clearly mentions relationships with school staff as essential to parent involvement. Similarly Mrs. Lourdes also explained that her parents did not attend any of her school events while she was growing up, and in her descriptions of parent involvement she focuses on the less visible *little things* parents do to define involvement. This indicates a complex relationship between personal experiences and definitions of parent involvement.

Some studies have examined the relationship between teacher belief and practice, suggesting that teacher belief plays a significant role in how teachers teach (Pajares, 1992). In some cases such beliefs are not based on actual fact or general consensus, but still remain unchanged because of individual belief systems. In her extensive work analyzing the role of beliefs in teachers' thinking, Nespor (1987) suggested that a "crucial

experience or some particularly influential teacher produces a richly detailed episodic memory which later serves the student as an inspiration and a template for his or her own teaching practices” (p. 320). Furthermore, in his review of the literature on teacher beliefs Pajares (1992) concluded that “educational beliefs of preservice teachers play a pivotal role in their acquisition and interpretation of knowledge and subsequent teaching behavior and that unexplored entering beliefs may be responsible for the perpetuation of antiquated and ineffectual teaching practices” (p. 328). I suggest that a similar phenomenal is occurring with constructs of parent involvement. Teachers and supporting staff at Community High are constructing definitions and expectations of parent involvement based on their personal experiences and realities. The apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) is occurring with educators’ understanding of parent involvement. Consequently staff past experiences and realities reflect their constructs of current expectations for parent involvement; in the case of Mrs. Heather that means having relationships with the school principal and teachers, and for Beth that meant learning how to use online resources. Unfortunately these do not reflect the experiences and realities of most immigrant families.

The majority of the strategies and ideas for parent–teacher interactions were only realistic for certain groups of parents (middle class), thus reinforcing the reproduction of standards and expectation most minority parents do not share. As we saw in the example with Beth, expecting parents to use the Internet to access student information was unrealistic given the reality of the populations within the school. Nevertheless, at

Community High staff and teachers continued to construct parent involvement based on their personal experiences.

Findings also reveal that parents were rarely viewed as resources at Community High. Although the staff was frequently invited to speak to parents about their school roles and “train” parents on the school culture; parents were never given opportunities to be sources of information for staff. Failing to consider parents as resources was a visible barrier to beneficial changes in parent involvement expectations at Community High. Bao, the only Hmong teacher and 1 of only 2 minority teachers in the school, spoke in detail about the need for staff development when it came to cultural awareness:

Sometimes it may take professional development at the cultural level, understanding who is their students and how can we incorporate the parents’ voices. I think they [staff] have to understand that within different cultures, education is viewed differently. You have to understand that. I think it’s just a lot of cultural understanding of how is education perceived. They have to understand that in some cultures, teachers are held to a higher esteem, so they wouldn’t necessarily question what teachers do. It doesn’t mean that they’re not involved; it just means that they perceive that position differently.

I think, really, it’s just being knowledgeable of the community that you’re working with, the parents, the culture, how do they view education, how do they view expectation, discipline and all of that, and find a medium that will allow them [parents] to voice their concerns. So, really just open up communication, I think. (May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011, interview)

Informed by her personal experiences as a minority student in the U.S. educational system, Bao focuses on a two-way model for parent involvement. For Bao communication means equal opportunities for parents and staff to share information, concerns and engage in negotiating expectations. Nevertheless, the school continued to focus on parent education in most of their parent involvement efforts. Again this speaks

to the schools' approach of viewing parents through a deficit model and their one-way approach to parent involvement.

### **Synthesizing the Findings**

At Community High the opportunities for parent involvement were limited to spaces where parents were given information about the school. The school's perception was that parents wanted and need information about the school in order to be actively involved. Parent programs and groups were formed around academic goals, where the school provided information about the curriculum, acceptable forms of engagement, and school procedures. These spaces were filled with supporting staff that provided an overwhelming amount of formal resources. Although welcomed by parents, it failed to provide opportunities for building meaningful connections and rapport between the staff, teachers, and parents. Although some of the staff recognized the need for these opportunities, institutional structures were often barriers (e.g., teacher contracts). Additionally, at Community High parent interactions were mostly with supporting staff, including social workers, testing coordinators and family liaisons, rather than teachers. This presents a significant gap in the current literature that tends to focus on parent–teacher interactions (see Christenson, 1995 for an exception). At Community High, parent contact with teachers was limited to 5–10 minutes twice a year at parent–teacher conferences. Unless parents initiated contact to follow up on specific classroom issues, or returned teacher phone calls and email messages, access to teachers was limited. Teachers never attended the various events that welcomed parents. This access created a significant distance between parents and teachers.

Finally, through the data collected, I built an understanding of how parent involvement expectations were constructed, communicated, and enacted at Community High. Traditional beliefs of parent involvement were present in discourses among administrators, supporting staff and teachers. These beliefs were transmitted in interactions with parents. School expectations for parent involvement were communicated to parents without consideration to their social or culture realities. The issue was not parents' misunderstanding of what was expected, for example they knew the school expected them to attend parent–teacher conferences and access school information online. These expectations were often communicated in various spaces where parents were present. However, parents' ability to meet these expectations were never considered. In particular online access, as reported in the study, was an assumed requirement for parent involvement at Community High. Most schools today utilize some form of School View and in some environments this may be a convenient and efficient way for schools to communicate with parents. However, online access is just another form of school presence and superficial involvement. The supporting staff clearly communicated the importance of School View, and teachers like Mr. Joe used this school resource to identify which parents were involved in their child's education. School View was part of the parent involvement script at Community High. However, some immigrant parents at the school were not equipped to meet these expectations. For example, Mai the Hmong mother clearly identified herself as unable to access School View for information. Rather than creating alternative methods to reach out to parents like Mai, the staff expected Mai to carve out time in her schedule to come to the school and learn how

to use the computer. Access to School View is part of the new school capital at Community High, and potentially illustrates the evolving nature of social and cultural capital frameworks introduced by Bourdieu (1986). Imposing additional challenges, like learning new computer skills, for parental involvement only further alienates parents like Mai and continues to reinforce social inequalities within the school. Most importantly, schools fail to recognize that online access to school information provides no meaningful form of parent involvement.

Nevertheless, the findings of this work suggest that schools recognize the importance of parent involvement and that they are in fact engaged in parent involvement initiatives. In the past decade schools, like Community High, have invested considerable funding to developing and introducing online systems like School View. Additionally program similar to KP have been emerging in several schools and districts. In fact, as presented earlier the KP curriculum was adapted from another existing parent program. Nonetheless all these initiatives continue to promote a one-way form of involvement, where the school sets the agenda and the forms of engagement. The school's online system exemplifies one-way communication, since parents were not able to add or change the information posted, leaving the school in control of the interaction. Additionally, programs like KP also promote a one-way form of involvement in which parents have little voice or power. Parents are expected to attend, but they have no control of the agenda or subject matter. The curriculum is designed with content the school assumes parents need to successfully support their children.

## Chapter 6

### Making Sense of Parent Involvement Expectations

The literature is filled with arguments of why and how parents should be involved in the school experience and there are just as many viewpoints among educators and parents. In U.S. public schools, parent involvement is said to play a key role in positive school experiences and successful student outcomes. Recently conversations about the diversity of parents and their unique needs have also begun to shape new approaches to parental involvement. The presence of an increased number of immigrant students both in urban and suburban schools is only expected to increase. This suggests that old ways of approaching parent involvement need to be reconsidered for each school context. How schools design parent involvement efforts and how educators define and communicate parent involvement expectations will play a key role in the success of immigrant students. Established notions for involvement, such as homework help, attending parent–teacher conferences, talking about college at home, or attending school functions, etc., may need to be reconsidered and adjusted. The conversation of how schools can develop meaningful partnerships with families where school staff, teachers and parents can work together to provide students with positive school experiences is only just beginning.

There is no question that the amount of research in the area of parental involvement has provided significant contributions to educators. The last 2 decades of research in this area have come a long way from blaming parents or teachers for ineffective home–school partnerships, and highlighted the significant impact other factors have on parental involvement. Based on Bourdieu’s (1986) instruments of analysis

(social and cultural capital), researchers have been able to uncover the structures that shape the home–school partnership—for example, socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2000), race (Carter, 2003; Ogbu, 2003), and ethnicity and culture (Dyson, 2001; Valdés, 1996), which all influence how parents and teachers perceive and construct their interactions. If educators are to fulfill promises of “access to all” in school, they must question current parental involvement practices and begin the process of “upsetting” existing definitions of what counts as involvement. Through this process educators can recognize that current practices favor white upper-middle class and disadvantage low-SES immigrant families.

In Chapter 2, we learned how social and cultural capital mediate educational experiences and outcomes through a close examination of studies in the field of educational research. These studies reveal that social and cultural capital is an important instrument of analysis that serves to unveil the reality of school inequalities. Through definitions of social capital as the connections or networks within families, and more broadly within communities, researchers have pointed to vast amount of resources members can access and activate for the benefit of students. Acquired cultural capital provides students with an important “commodity” that can be “traded” in school settings for greater opportunities. These concepts build a strong argument, accepted by many in the field, that schools are not neutral spaces. They replicate the inequalities of society by recognizing and legitimizing certain capital while marginalizing others. As a consequence, some students are disadvantaged compared to others. There is evidence that SES and ethnicity play a role in the ability to access, transmit and embody the required capital of schools. However, even with all their contributions, researchers have continued

to position social and cultural capital as “possessions”: if individuals or communities acquire X and have access to Y they can obtain Z.

When I began my dissertation work at Community High, I intended to investigate the process of constructing parent involvement. I imagined teachers at the center of this process. I quickly discovered that supporting staff played a significant role in this process. Although the current literature focuses on teacher–parent relationships, I discovered that parent contact with teachers is extremely limited and it is actually the supporting staff (e.g., guidance counselors, family liaisons, social workers) that engages in interactions and communication that shape parents’ perceptions of involvement in schools. At Community High school spaces that welcomed parents were a crucial factor in situating this reality. As I described in Chapter 4, the school provided several spaces for parents at the school (e.g., Family Resource Center, KP program, Health Center, events); however, none of these provided opportunities to interact with teachers. Data presented here coincide with Chávez-Reyes (2010) statement that “most teachers center their role of parent involvement in the classroom—staying within their domain of power. To diffuse the unequal balance of power and to model collaboration… teachers [must] engage in a range of strategies across community/homes, school campuses, and classrooms to generate an inclusive approach to parent involvement” (p. 493–494). At Community High, this means teacher presence in spaces other than their classrooms and parent–teacher conferences; parents need opportunities to interact with teachers socially and begin the process of building trust by getting to know each other.

Another significant discovery in this dissertation work is that the supporting staff played a key role in shaping parents' belief of acceptable forms of involvements. In spaces of interaction the staff focused on providing academic school information; this positioned staff as knowledgeable informants and parents as deficient. At Community High parent involvement programs reflected a parent education approach, were the school focused on informing parents on specific school materials. The school's position suggests that low parent involvement is a result of parents' lack of understanding of the school system and ways of providing support. Under this assumption, the expectation was that once parents were taught how to engage in school, parent involvement would increase. However this was not the case, the number of parents participating in the KP program and Multicultural Nights decreased dramatically during my time at the school. The findings suggest that parent expectations and needs were drastically different. Parent narratives expressed a need for personal relationship building. Currently studies suggest that immigrant parents feel they are forced to adapt to existing expectations of home-school interactions and consequently sacrifice their own ethnic identities (Inman et al., 2007; Patel, Power, & Bhavnagri, 1996). Although both educators and researchers have advocated for the need to problematize this reality, few have begun the process of reflection that leads to actual transformation. The data here suggest that parent involvement programs need to be school wide initiatives, where collaboration between teachers and parents is extended to include supporting staff.

In Chapter 5, I also present a new problem in the parent involvement paradigm, where new expectations for involvement are being accepted in school without regard to

parents' reality. As the findings show, online access is now expected as a form of involvement. For many families, this is simply not a realistic expectation. Although the use of computers may seem commonplace for many families this continues to be challenging for some. Having a computer, knowing how to use it and access to bilingual online information is still a significant barrier for many families. In most cases school websites and parent resources are only provided in English. At Community High the expectation of online access for involvement only further marginalize immigrant families. As Mr. Morales, the English Language Learning coordinator, explained, "...the biggest thing that we find is that it's the technology piece that isn't accessible and so even as much as we encourage it and we want that, a lot of our immigrant parents are like, "Can't help you. Don't have internet at home." And we understand that." Because of his direct contact with parents, Mr. Morales seemed to understand the challenge of requiring parents to access information online. This suggests that Community High was a space where families were limited in their ability to access the necessary school capital for the benefit of their children.

### **Limitations**

I had the unique opportunity to experience the interactions at Community High for an entire year. The staff at the school gave me access to a variety of spaces; they encouraged and welcomed me to participate in all parent related activities at the school. But even with such access, I undoubtedly missed important interactions between parents and staff. My data did not include private interactions between parents and teachers. Observing these interactions may have provided me with a different lens to interpret

teacher access. How parents describe these interactions are key in understanding how they navigate their relationships with teachers and perceive the limited access.

Another limitation of my work is that I was unable to gather data in the homes of immigrant families. Few studies have ventured into the home to collect data on family interactions (Lareau, 2000; Valdés, 1996). In fact, the vast majority of studies in the area of parental involvement rely on the school as the primary research site. Home practice information is usually gathered through survey data that rely on the self-reporting of parents. Although valid, this approach leaves many unanswered questions on what actually is happening in the home (i.e., parent–child interactions that promote learning). Researchers that have ventured outside the school building for data collection have reported poignant information on the topic of parental involvement. Valdés's (1996) work in the Mexican immigrant community, where she interacted and observed families in their homes provided an enormous amount of relevant information on how this minority group perceived the school–family relationship and home practices that promote learning. In addition, the work of the *Funds of Knowledge* project has also recognized the vast amount of resources existing in homes that can be integrated into the curriculum and utilized in classroom practices. This work has also helped teachers realize their preconceived notions of family home interactions, and recognize that learning takes place in different forms. Although home learning, in many cases, does not mirror classroom learning it nevertheless serves to support educational goals shared by both the home and school. If teachers want to continue to grow as experts in education they must be

encouraged to welcome additional tools to their teaching practices, which can be found inside the homes of students.

Finally, I recognize that my analysis is often through the lens of the staff, and not parents, and this troubles me as a parent advocate. I believe that parent involvement should be a two-way dialogue where both school staff and parents have equal voice. However, access to parents outside the school may be difficult given the constraints researchers have by their universities' internal review board (IRB) process. It troubles me that when I began this work my intention was to report on the experiences of parents, but as I reviewed and analyzed my data, it was the voices of staff that emerged. Although troubling, it only reflects the reality that school staff dominate parent involvement discourses and control the forms of engagement. I hope future scholars will be encouraged to capture the experiences and voices of parents, and report on parent involvement expectations through their lens.

### **Final Words**

I feel it is important to point out that the principal and staff at Community High welcomed my presence at the school. After several meetings where I shared my research goals; the staff were excited about my work and were always willing to talk with me throughout the study. During my numerous conversations with Principal Jones, she often asked me about my findings and invited me to share ways in which I felt the school could improve their parent involvement efforts. Regardless of the faults I have identified, the desire to reach out to parents and improve parent involvement efforts were genuine. I chose Community High because of these efforts, and their commitment to invest in

parents at the school. The school's community school model provided a variety of resources that were appreciated by families. On several occasions I heard parents express their gratitude for the Health Center that provided free care for their children. The model went a long way in positing the school as a caring environment that went beyond academic learning. But even when schools create systems to support the needs of diverse families it does not guarantee successful parent involvement.

Like many novice scholars I entered Community High filled with excitement and considerable knowledge of current research on my topic. I had spent extensive time reading and writing on issues related to parent involvement. I had conducted several small-scale pilot studies exploring issues of immigrant parent involvement and felt prepared to engage fully in an extended 1-year ethnography. I even expected to encounter some of the obstacles and barriers that are widely reported within the literature of parent involvement. The mismatch of expectations by immigrant parents and traditional school staff personnel is not in itself new information. Lareau (2000) and Valdés (1996) have written extensively on these issues in their books, and numerous other scholars have made significant contributions through journal publications. Still it was shocking to recognize that most of this academic work had virtually no impact on the realities of everyday school routines. This leads me to question the trickle down approach of academia. Does the considerable amount of research conducted by scholars in higher education reach the actual K–12 school context? What responsibility do academics have to share research findings with actual school agents that implement change?

Community High functioned, as I assume most schools nationwide, with limited understanding of the realities of the communities they serve. Bourdieu's (1986) groundbreaking work on the social reproduction of social inequalities in school has been around for over 50 years. Countless studies have provided evidence that institutional practices contribute to the inequalities of the school experience for diverse students (Lareau, 2000; Ogbu, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Zhou & Bankston III, 1994). In the particular case of Community High, the community school model helped alleviate some of these social inequalities by providing important social services to school families.

Nevertheless, the school struggled to build trust among the immigrant community, which in some cases felt marginalized by teacher and staff attitudes, school expectation of Internet access, limited access to teachers, lack of bilingual staff and spaces for engagement with school staff. My experience at Community High suggests that school change regarding implementation of programs that establish meaningful parent involvement requires more than academic inquiry, it requires policy actions at the local, state and national level. If schools are to promote greater parent access to teachers, contractual changes need to take place that will allow time and space for such interactions. For example, compensated time for teachers to do home visits and be available to parents after school. Additionally, state and national funding attached to parent involvement needs to include cultural awareness training for teachers and supporting school staff, rather than simply require the documented paperwork and meetings under current title I and III regulations. In order for principals to be affective leaders and fulfill their administrative roles to "orchestrate activities that will help staff

study and understand parent involvement, and to select or design, evaluate, and revise programs for parent involvement" (Epstein, 1987), there needs to be official value to parent involvement. Rather than simply providing research evidence that increased parent involvement results in greater student achievement; educational institutions needs to validate these narratives with actual policy implementation.

Although the benefits of parental involvement are well documented, educators have been slow to respond, for example, at the teacher preparation level (Shores, 1998). As Gonzalez-DeHass and Willems (2003) rightly conclude the "deficit is born from a lack of preparation of preservice teachers and is perpetuated with lack of professional development through in-service training" (p. 95). In other words, regardless of whether training to work in meaningful ways with parents should start at the preservice level or wait until in-service experiences are formed, the reality is that teacher training is necessary in order to achieve effective parental involvement. Furthermore, recognizing the lack of teacher preparation to engage parents is meaningless if it is not followed by a call to action (Shores, 1998). Teachers will continue to underutilize and potentially marginalize parents if parental involvement is not valued within teacher preparation programs and legitimized as a key factor for student achievement. As Katz and Bauch's (1999) study at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University (that has required a parental involvement course for over 10 years) found, teachers who took parental involvement courses as undergraduates were more likely to implement parent involvement activities and engage parents. The study also found that teachers felt more prepared to engage in parental involvement activities and consequently "reached more families in their classes

than teachers who did not take the course” (p. 66). Even with strong evidence that preparation makes a difference, few universities or states have taken steps to include parent involvement as part of licensure requirements. At Community High there was a recognized effort to address parent involvement, the school initiated and implemented the KP program, however the success of such program still require that all staff buy into these efforts. This is unlikely when individual schools are up against boarder institutional forces that fail to recognize the importance and value of such programs.

In the final chapter of her book *Con Respeto*, Valdés (1996) poses an important question, “Can we and should we intervene?” Here Valdés questions the intention of parent involvement programs, and points to her fear that some programs are simply promoting assimilation. I agree that when parent involvement programs are only providing school information and school expectations for involvement they inadvertently become spaces to reproduce existing ideologies, many of which are negative in regards to immigrant families. However, I do believe intervention is needed, but it must begin among teachers and supporting staff. The greatest lesson I have learned is that parent involvement training is needed, and the greatest need is in fact among school staff. During my time at Community High I was reassured that parents do want to be involved and desperately seek opportunities to support their children’s educational achievements, but not always in ways the school expects or accept.

What many schools fail to understand and recognize is that for most immigrant families, being here is the ultimate form of parent involvement. The sacrifice of leaving their home countries and family members, and coming to the U.S. to provide their

children with better educational opportunities is in many cases, particularly for Latino immigrants, the reason families migrated in the first place. Once here, they enroll their children in school and expect schools will provide the quality education they went to great length to access. Unfortunately, given the current structure of schools and the ideologies surrounding parent involvement expectations, the rewards of this sacrifice are increasingly unlikely for many immigrant families.

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## Appendix A

### Parent Generated Questions for KP Principal Night

1. Cual seria la major manera de nosotros ayudar a los estudiantes poner mas interes a la escuela y obtener buenas calificaciones? (What is the best way we can help our kids be more interested in school and get better grades?)
2. Cual es su opinion acerca del racismo en la escuela? Que medidas se toman? (What is your opinion about racism in the school? What measures are taken?)
3. Que tanprove o que nivel de pandilleros shoy en la escuela? (What is the level of gang involvement present in the school?)
4. Hay alguien en la escuela que controle el uso de drogas? (Is there someone at the school that controls the use of drugs?)
5. Como nosotros podemos estar seguros que neustros hijos estan dentro de la clases por todo el dia escolar? (How can we as parents be sure our children are in class during the full school day?)
6. Que metados tienen para controlar las pandillas/drogas? (In what ways do you control gangs and drugs?)
7. Que medidos/precaciones esta tomando la escuela para prevenir que los estudiantes no tragan armas la escuela? (What measures and precautions are the school taking to prevent students from bringing guns to school?)
8. Que ajudas les dan a los estudiantes que se sienten molestados o intimidados por otros estudiantes? (What help is provided for students that feel harassed or intimidated by other students?)
9. Por que no usan uniforme? (Why don't you use uniforms?)
10. Por que los estudiantes se basan y se abrazan en frente de padres, estudiantes, e maestros? (Why do students kiss and hug in front of parents, students and teachers?)
11. Por que cambiaron el horario da escuela? (Why did the school time change?)
12. Que podemos hacer los padres, o usted como directora para ayudar a los estudiantes cuando lo necesiten? (What can we as parents and you as the principal do to help kids when they are in need?)
13. A los ninos que reubnen clases especiales, les, afecta no estar en clases regulares? (For students that are in special classes, does that affect them in regular classes?)

14. Que tanto afecta al estudiante que la escuela tenga bajas calificaciones en los examenes del estado? (Does it affect students that the school has low scores in the state exams?)
15. Y como padres que podemos hacer para ayudar? (What can I do as a parent to help?)
16. Aqui hacen un examen para detectar drogas? Que puedo hacer yo como padre si hubo alguien que le ofrecio draga a mi hijo en la escuela? (Do they do drug tests at the school? What can I do as a parent if someone offers my child drugs?)
17. Soy un parent con un poco de ignorancia y quisiera saber un poco mas del funcionamiento de la escuela. Como podria ponerme en contacto con persona indicada? (I am a parent that is a little ignorant and wanted to know more about how the school functions? How can I contact the right person?)
18. Por que no podemos mandar mensajes de texto cuando no estamos en clase? (Why can't we send text messages in class?)
19. Se podrian hacer unas platicas mas seguidas entre padres y maestros para aver como podriamos ayudarnos mutualmente en la educacion de nuestros hijos? (Could there be more frequent conversations between parents and teachers so we could mutually help in the education of our children?)
20. Cuantos anos tiene trabajando aqui? (How long have you worked here?)
21. Cual es su major consejo para un estudiante? (What is your advise to students?)

## Appendix B

### Sample School Staff Formal Interview Protocol

1. Can you start by telling me a little about your background? How did you end up working at CH?
2. Can you tell me a little about your educational background?
3. \*\*\*
4. Let me start by asking you how would you define parental involvement here at CH? What does parental involvement mean at this school?
5. Can you describe in your own words what is your expectation of CH parents? How are these expectations communicated to parents/immigrant parents?
6. In your understanding how does parental involvement connect to student academic achievement?
7. How does your position provide you with opportunities to interact with immigrant parents? Can you share with me a meaningful interaction you had with an immigrant parent recently?
8. How prepared to you feel as an educator to interact with immigrant parents?
9. In what ways do you feel CH differentiates their strategies for parental involvement based on their specific student populations?
10. In what ways do you feel the school staff (not teachers) impacts the home-school relationship?

11. In what ways does the school work with supporting staff (e.g., family liaison, guidance counselor, social workers) to build the home–school relationship?
12. How would you imagine the home–school relationship ideally?