

## **Latino Families and Parent Involvement in Oregon Schools: Current Issues and Models**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores varying models and views of parent involvement, with special focus on Latino families and parent involvement in Oregon. Although there is extensive support for the idea that parents—especially parents of color, immigrants, and parents with low incomes—be involved in their children’s schooling, often community members, parents, school officials, researchers, and policymakers disagree on how parent involvement is defined, what its goals are, and who gets to define and lead initiatives. At the heart of debates on parent involvement in US schools lie issues of culture, language, and power (Delgado Gaitan 2012). Building on Delgado Gaitan’s (2012) outline of power-sharing relationships, the author analyzes three main models of Latino parent involvement: conventional/mainstream approaches, culturally responsive models, and empowerment and community organizing strategies. The paper ends with insights from promising practices for Oregon for Latino families, community members, educators, and policymakers to consider as they move forward in their work to reform schools.

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## Introduction

*Si aquí está yendo su niño y si uno como papá no esté involucrado en la escuela, el maestro no exige a ese niño, o no le pone interés en enseñarle a este niño y en México no. En México, sabes que va tu niño, va a ir aprendiendo. El maestro está trabajando y el niño, si sabe, va pasar de años. Si no sabe nada, si no sabe leer, si no sabe escribir, no sabe hacer cuentos, el niño no va a pasar el año. Y allí te vas dando cuenta como padre cuál es el avance del niño y aquí no te das cuenta. Aquí, los maestros no comunican. Solo lo dejan pasar el niño. Por eso, tienes que estar involucrada.*

If your child is going to school here [in the US] and if you as a parent are not involved in school, the teacher will not push your child, or he will not put interest in teaching this child and in Mexico, no. In Mexico, you know if your child goes to school, he going to be learning. The teacher is working and if your child learns, he will pass his grade. If he doesn't learn anything, if he doesn't know how to read, if he doesn't know how to write, if he doesn't know how to write stories, your child will not pass his grade. And there [in Mexico], you start realizing as a parent how your child is advancing and here you don't realize this. Here, the teachers don't communicate. They only let your child pass. Because of that, you need to be involved.

-Excerpt from Interview with Martha Bonilla<sup>2</sup>, March 2012

Martha Bonilla is a forty-year-old mother of three from a small town in the Mexican state of Michoacán. Martha is a strong, stoic woman who has survived many hardships in her life: from enduring emotional and physical abuse in her first marriage, to crossing an Arizona desert through the help of a *coyote*<sup>3</sup> only to be sent back by *la migra* (border patrol), to re-crossing the border months later to work in a fruit processing plant in Fresno, California. Martha remarried in California and soon after the birth of her first son Rogelio, she moved to Oregon in the mid-1990s, where she now lives with her family in a two-bedroom apartment. She explains that her life's mission is "*educar mis hijos*" (to educate my children). This means both to instill values and manners in them (Valdés 1996, Reese et al. 1995, Villenas & Deyhle 1999, Chávez 2007), and to provide them with formal schooling, in her words, "*para que sean professionals*" (so they become professionals).

In our March 2012 interview, Martha goes on to detail the many educational trainings and groups she has joined because of them. She explains to me why it is imperative that I be involved in my young son's schooling. She treats much of our interview as a lesson in parenting, offering me advice on what I should do to prepare my two-year-old son for school, how to be involved once he starts kindergarten, and how to navigate US schools as a Latina mother. She is emphatic, repeatedly telling me: "*Katy, tienes que estar involucrada*" (Katy, you have to be involved).

<sup>2</sup> All names of research participants have been changed to protect their identities.

<sup>3</sup> A *coyote* is a person who smuggles migrants across a border to evade immigration officials and checkpoints. They work usually with partners or with other *coyotes* for a fee paid upon arrival to the migrant's destination or in two parts (before and after crossing).

Martha isn't alone in her belief of the importance of parent involvement or engagement. Parent involvement<sup>4</sup> is a widely studied and supported concept in education. Many teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers see parent involvement as key to children's educational success in the United States. There are several meta-analyses<sup>5</sup> that collectively analyze hundreds of different empirical studies. These meta-analyses find that parent involvement in different forms has a positive relationship to student achievement, often defined as higher standardized test scores or raised grades (Jeynes 2012, 2003, Ferguson 2008, Henderson & Mapp 2002, Fan & Chen 2001). Despite overwhelming support for the idea that parents—especially parents of color, immigrants, and parents with low incomes—be involved in their children's schooling, often scholars, educators, and parents disagree on basic questions around the forms this involvement should take. Some of these basic questions include:

- How is parent involvement or engagement defined?
- Who gets to define it? (Olivos, Ochoa, & Jiménez-Castellanos, 2011)
- What are the goals of parent involvement and engagement? (Why is it important?)

These questions lead to even more basic considerations of language, culture, and power in schools (Delgado Gaitan 2012), particularly with Latino families<sup>6</sup> and immigrant communities. As Concha Delgado Gaitan (2012) explains, “at the heart of family-school partnerships is a power relationship determined by knowledge about the educational system that families have and vice versa—what schools know about families” (p. 306). How school officials understand a family and the family's resources is interpreted through teachers' and administrators' own socioeconomic and cultural positions. Their understandings will influence how schools reach out to families and interpret parents' current forms of participation. Inversely, families' own schooling histories (especially for those educated outside of the US) and what families learn about US schools through their social networks impact their expectations of teacher-parent relationships. Further, day-to-day socioeconomic constraints for working-class or low-income families affect the extent to which parents can participate in ways visible to school officials.

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<sup>4</sup> A goal of this paper is to describe the different definitions of “parent involvement” especially for Latino parents and families. A very basic working definition of parent involvement is: the activities parents engage in that pertain to the education and/or schooling of their children.

<sup>5</sup> Definition of a meta-analysis: “A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given subject to determine the aggregated results of said research” (Jeynes 2012, p. 707).

<sup>6</sup> “Latino families” refer to any kin or family unit with ancestral or direct familial ties to countries in Latin America. Latinos include a range of individuals and groups from different countries, with different languages, cultures, and histories, and who may have lived in the United States for many years or generations. The author will also refer to a range of families of color and families from low-income backgrounds (including those categorized as working class or living at or below the poverty line). In no way does the author suggest that being Latino is synonymous with being low-income, though she may refer to such categories at the same time.

Based on her experiences of the Mexican school system as a child, Martha believed that as a parent she needed to respect the teacher as the educational authority, who would not pass her son if he was not proficient in necessary skills, like reading or writing at grade level. She believed in a direct correlation between passing a grade and being proficient at grade-level skills. She assumed that if there were any problems, teachers would communicate directly with her. When her son Rogelio reached middle school and teachers told her that he was years behind in his literacy skills, she was stunned and was told if she had been “involved”, she would have known. Teachers put the onus on her as a parent to make sure her son was progressing well.

This is not simply an unfortunate case of “miscommunication” between Martha and her son’s elementary school teachers. There were implicit, unstated expectations and, as Delgado Gaitan (2012) would describe, literacies or ways of knowing about how parents “should” navigate schools within a US middle-class context. But, Martha was not aware of them and as a result her son was disadvantaged by a school system that expected her constant vigilance (Delgado Gaitan 1991). She herself was seen as “not involved” though she is an attentive and sometimes demanding mother. These are cultural disconnects infused with inequalities in knowledge and power between the teachers who could blame Martha, and Martha who was seen as uninvolved or disinterested in her children’s education. This led to a basic distrust that fuels her passion for parent involvement.

This paper explores varying models and views of parent involvement, with special focus on Latino families and parent involvement in Oregon. First, I discuss the particular context of Oregon as an emerging immigrant destination and the implications for parent involvement and engagement in Oregon schools. Second, utilizing Delgado Gaitan’s (2012) description of family-community-school power relationships, I describe three distinct parent involvement models: conventional (mainstream), culturally responsive family-school-community connections, and empowerment (models of parent involvement and community organizing)<sup>7</sup>. Lastly, the paper ends with insights from promising practices for Oregon Latino families, community members, educators, and policymakers to consider as they move forward in their work together.

### **Oregon: Parent involvement in an emerging Latino immigrant destination**

Oregon and the Pacific Northwest have been called emerging immigrant destinations, as the state and region have experienced unprecedented increases in the immigrant population, particularly among Latino immigrants (Bussel 2008). In 2010, persons of Hispanic<sup>8</sup> or Latino origin made up 11.7% of Oregon’s population (US Census Bureau

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<sup>7</sup> Concepts introduced in parenthesis are my additions to Delgado Gaitan’s (2012) framework.

<sup>8</sup> While the author will use “Latino” to refer to persons and communities with ancestry from Latin America, “Hispanic” is used in this instance, as that is the category used by the US Census Department. It

2010, Oregon); this is up from 8% in 2000 (US Census Bureau 2000, Oregon). These might not seem like large percentages compared to states like California or Texas, but in Oregon, the Latino population itself (including foreign-born immigrants and US-born Latinos) increased 70% between 1980-1990 and then over 140% between 1990-2000 (Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza 2010, p. 139).

Newer immigrants join a diverse community of US-born Latinos who have lived in Oregon since the early 1900s (Garcia & Garcia 2005). Although a majority of the increased population is comprised of first generation *mexicanos* and their children, there are multiple Latino immigrant generations within the state, including families and individuals from different Latin American countries (e.g. Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Peru, Mexico), who speak different languages (e.g. English, Spanish, Mayan, Mixtec), with different religious backgrounds, cultures, and histories. According to Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza (2010), Oregon “has long served as an overflow delta for surplus migrant labor in California” (p. 30). Since the 1920s, migrant farm workers have journeyed up through California to work in Oregon’s fertile Willamette Valley, Rogue River Valley, and other agricultural areas in the state. Many third- and fourth-generation<sup>9</sup> Mexican-Americans in the state come from families that fled the “intense racism and discrimination of the Southwest, Texas in particular” in hopes of “a better life in the Northwest” in the 1960s-1980s (Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza 2010, p.7). These later generation Latinos alongside newer immigrants are slowly, but increasingly going to college and entering more white-collar employment (Gonzales-Berry et al. 2006, Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza 2010).

Oregon is a diversifying state, but it is also a state that has yet to fully acknowledge and accept the demographic and social changes that are happening within its borders. In their article “Oregon: An Emerging Immigrant Gateway,” Hardwick & Martinez (2008) explain, “the perception of Oregon as a white place is deeply entrenched and has been influenced by the region’s larger historical context of settlement dominated by European Americans” (p. 17). A prominent historical narrative involves the Oregon Trail traversed by the famed explorers Lewis and Clark. The pervasive feeling of “whiteness” in the Oregon’s social and political mainstream makes it difficult for recognition of immigrant-specific issues. There are also incidents of outright racism and violence in the state. Describing the beating of two Mexican immigrants by high school students in southern Oregon, Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza (2010) state: “although *mexicanos* have long been in Oregon and diligently have worked to carve out a niche for themselves and their families in the economic and social fabric of the state, we still have a long way to go before they are recognized as more than just the people who pick our crops” (p. 87).

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will also appear when providing data from the Oregon Department of Education’s annual report, which also uses this ethnic category.

<sup>9</sup> First-generation immigrants are individuals who came to the US. The second-generation includes their children. Third- and fourth-generations consist of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren respectively of immigrants.

*What do these demographic changes mean for parent involvement in Oregon?*

Much of the research done around parent involvement, particularly for racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families and families from working-class or low-income backgrounds has been conducted in states with much larger and well-established Latino communities, such as California, New York, and Texas among others (Lowenhaupt 2012). In a context of rapid demographic change and an influx of new Latino immigrants in emerging immigrant destinations like Oregon, Wisconsin, and South Carolina among other states, educational systems are often catching up to meet the demand of increased enrollment in dual-immersion, English as a Second Language (ESL), and migrant education programs among other services for immigrant families and students. In her study of the New Latino Diaspora in Wisconsin, Lowenhaupt (2012) finds that although districts provided translation and interpretation for Spanish-speaking families, “immigrant families’ participation in traditional forms of family engagement was rare, perhaps due to a focus on providing newcomers with the opportunity to engage in current practices instead of redefining those practices to reflect changing demographics” (p. 20). Providing adequate and professional interpretation and translation services is vital and often is a struggle for schools to deliver consistently to families who speak a language other than English at home. However, Lowenhaupt’s (2012) work points to a deeper disconnect between schools and families in newer immigrant destinations. Building understanding between communities and schools as well as creating culturally responsive and respectful opportunities for Latino families seem also important.

In Oregon, Hispanic students represent 21.04% of all Oregon public school students (Oregon Department of Education 2012). Within the last three years, the population of Hispanic students in Oregon public schools is the ethnic group with the only reported increase: from 97,287 (17.25% of total) in the 2008-2009 school year to 118,017 students or 21.04% of all Oregon students in 2011-2012 (p. 5). Although Latinos represent the second largest group of students in Oregon schools, according to the state’s annual public education report, in the 2011-2012 school year:

- Hispanic students experienced one of the lowest high school graduation rates: only 56.5% of Hispanic students graduated in four years versus 70.1% of their White counterparts (p. 20).
- Over a third (38.17%) of Hispanic students (kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade) failed to meet grade level in English/Language Arts (compared to 17.28% of White students) (p. 20).
- Over half (51.49%) of Hispanic students (K-12 grade) failed to meet grade level in Mathematics (compared to 31.22% of white students) (p. 20).

- Hispanic students (as well as most students of color) are disproportionately *underrepresented* in Talented and Gifted Programs (TAG). Only 8.44% of students in Oregon's TAG programs are Hispanic versus 74.58% of TAG students who are White (p. 74). (Keep in mind that White students account for 65.33% of all Oregon students, while Hispanic students account for 21.04% of all Oregon students. (p. 5))

These data shows that many Latino/Hispanic students struggle in Oregon schools and are underrepresented in high achieving programs like TAG. Achievement gaps are a result of complex interactions between different factors: underfunded schools, instructional gaps, student learning and work, assessment issues, large-scale structural issues such as poverty, racism, and other societal inequities in our schools, among many other variables. These factors impact how students score in state tests or pass (or fail to pass) their classes or grades. Parent involvement is but one variable in this larger equation; but, it is an important consideration as districts and reformers seek to close achievement gaps, and parents and communities of color seek to address school inequities around the state.

Many parent involvement proponents believe increasing Latino parent participation in school-based activities to be vital to closing this gap. It is often seen as a panacea—one only need to listen to discussions of educational reform and someone will inevitably say “if we could only get more parents involved” or “what we really need is more parent involvement.” As cited earlier, there are many studies that support the idea that parent involvement boosts student achievement, but will it work in Oregon for Latino students? What will it take to promote equitable parent-teacher partnerships? Which forms of parent involvement and engagement will work better in the context of this emerging immigrant destination, with a growing multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Latino population? What parent involvement looks like and on whose terms it gets defined and enacted is crucial. Legislators, administrators, and other stakeholders pushing for parent involvement need to understand how issues of culture, language, and power impact equitable relationships among schools, families and communities of color.

### **Parent involvement orientations & models**

Parent involvement goes by many names in schools and studies of parent participation in education and schooling. Some of these names include: parent-teacher/school partnerships, home-school partnerships or collaborations, family-school-community partnerships, parent or family engagement (Olivos et al. 2011, Epstein 2009, Henderson & Mapp 2002). The most widely used term is parent or parental involvement. What parent involvement looks like depends on the philosophies of parents, organizations, or schools. Differences among practices are also contingent on the grade level or age of a parent's children. For example, how a father relates to his daughter's schooling in the first grade will vary drastically from how he relates to her schooling her

junior year of high school. In first grade, his daughter is learning to read, figuring out how to do homework, and her elementary school requires parent volunteers on field trips or other school events. Her father might help her with her homework worksheets, participate with her in their church's band, and help chaperone her class' visit to the zoo in addition to the essential everyday care and nurturing he does at home. Junior year, she is preparing for her SAT, trying to figure out her algebra homework, juggling her friendships and possible extra-curricular activities, and thinking about college. The father might appear "less involved" at the school depending on invitations to come to school, his work, and his daughter's desire for him to be there, though they might talk extensively about life at school and his expectations for her. They both navigate a changing relationship with each other and different expectations of parent roles in the higher grades.

Families, parents, and children, especially of color, immigrants, and those whose primary language isn't English, must traverse distinct cultural landscapes as they participate in US schools. A classic, yet relevant, definition of culture from Boas (1921) is: culture is formed of activities and reactions "composing a social group collectively and individually in relationship to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself" or herself (p. 149). Culture is relational and active. The cultural landscape of US schools is always changing depending on many factors, particularly what's new in school reform, learning, and teaching. Knowledge about how US schools operate and how parents can support their children in these spaces is "culturally bound" (Delgado Gaitan 2012, p. 306). As seen when Martha learns her son is several years behind in reading, having or not having this knowledge can have severe consequences for families and children.

The way parents in the US relate to schools—from the mundane cutting of elephants out of gray construction paper for his five-year-old's kindergarten class, to organizing the Parent-Teacher Association's (PTA) annual book drive for her son's middle school, to arguing for retesting of her seven-year-old daughter to be in the talented and gifted program—are all "culturally bound" activities that intersect with larger socioeconomic structures. Parents who did not go to school here in the US, who grew up in communities where those practices weren't the norm, or whose parents did not participate in school-based forms of parent involvement will not intuitively understand US school expectations around their involvement. If schools provided true equal opportunities and resources to all students in the US, perhaps parent involvement wouldn't be such an issue. But, despite the best intentions and efforts of teachers and administrators, schools reflect larger socioeconomic structures and inequalities in US society. Inequalities persistent in schools disenfranchise low- to moderate-income neighborhoods particularly in urban areas. Common problems include "overcrowding, deteriorating facilities, inadequate funding, high staff turnover, lack of up-to-date



textbooks, and children performing below grade level” (Gold, Simon, & Brown 2002, p. 5).

In order to end the achievement gaps in US schools, we need to address both technical issues of equity (e.g. facilities, funding, textbooks) as well as address “cultural norms about race, merit, and schooling that underlie the status quo and, for so many people, make specific equity responses so difficult to accept” (Oakes & Rogers 2006, p. 14). If we blame low-income and diverse parents for their children’s failures in schools because they aren’t involved in the way educators, researchers, and policymakers expect them to be, we will never be able to truly create equitable schools. Certain children from certain communities will always be seen as “at risk” for fault of their race, ethnicity, social class, language, or where their parents came from, unless we address both the technical and cultural sides of equity.

Both technical issues of equity in schools and cultural norms impact relationships between teachers and parents. Teachers who are already strained to address the needs of students in difficult circumstances may seek out more family support. Families and especially parents of color, immigrants, from low-income backgrounds or who speak a language other than English may in fact be involved in supporting school goals but not in ways visible to teachers. Parents also might feel that teachers are not responding to the needs of their children appropriately or communicating with them in effective or respectful ways. Delgado Gaitan (2012) calls relationships between school officials (i.e. teachers, counselors, principals) and parents “power-sharing relationships.” Issues of power emerge as parents and educators wrestle with control over a child’s schooling and education.<sup>10</sup> Educators hold a place of privilege in this relationship because they are official representatives of schools with knowledge of their subjects and how schools work. Delgado Gaitan (2012) outlines three main forms of power-sharing relationships: *conventional (mainstream)*, *culturally responsive family-school-community connections*, and *empowerment (models of parent involvement & community organizing)*. In this section, I make broad strokes to find patterns in different programs using these three types of power-sharing relationships. I acknowledge that some programs contain multiple models. For example, a community based empowerment program may advise parents on how to participate in more conventional or “mainstream” practices like attending parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings. To compare the different forms, I organize the discussion of each power-sharing relationship around the three basic questions listed in the introduction and one specifically about Latino families:

- How is parent involvement or engagement defined?
- Who gets to define it? (Olivos et al. 2011)

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<sup>10</sup> As an anthropologist, I see education as a larger cultural project all peoples engage in to teach individuals how to participate in a culture (Varenne 2008). US school culture is a more specific cultural space because it concerns how people living in the US prepare for and participate in the *schooling* of children.

- What are the goals of parent involvement and engagement? (Why is it important?)
- How do Latino families participate in this model?

### *Conventional or Mainstream Models*

Conventional or mainstream models encompass many school-based parent involvement forms: back to school nights, parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at schools or field trips, fundraising for schools, communication with a teacher, etc. These models tend to focus on parent involvement as it relates to school-related activities and support the agenda and objectives of the school. Some scholars would describe these forms of participation as “formal” because they occur within or in support of specific school goals versus “informal” parent involvement practices, which occur in private, home-based spaces focused on the general education or rearing of a child (LeFevre & Shaw 2011, De Gaetano 2007). The most common names attached to this form are: parent-teacher partnerships, home-school collaborations, or parent involvement.

*How is parent involvement or engagement defined in this model?* Parent involvement has been defined as parent practices and activities that support school goals and child learning (Epstein 1995, 2001, 2009). Perhaps the scholar most emblematic with conventional models is Joyce Epstein, whose typologies are highly influential. Epstein & Dauber (1991) outline six types of parental involvement:

1. *Parenting*, “basic obligations of families” to prepare children for school and healthy development;
2. *Communicating*, obligation of schools to communicate with families;
3. *Volunteering*, parent assisting teachers, administrators or children in the school and classroom;
4. *Learning at Home*, assisting children “at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children’s class work”;
5. *Decision-making*, governance and advocacy in “participatory roles in the parent-teacher association/organization (PTA/PTO), advisory councils,” etc.;
6. *Collaborating* with community organizations, including agencies, businesses, etc. (p. 290-291).

Epstein & Dauber’s (1991) model focuses on school-specific goals. Much of Epstein’s research usually focuses on how schools and teachers can motivate more active parental involvement and support (Fan & Chen 2001, p. 3).

*Who gets to define parent involvement in this model?* As Olivos et al. (2011) point out, often the power to define how parents are to be involved in schools “rests in the hands of school officials, researchers, and policymakers,” not with parents and especially not for Latino families or parents of color (p. 2). These institutional representatives set

the agenda for parent involvement programs and what consists of “good” parent involvement. Within particular school communities, school officials (usually principals or superintendents) get to outline the forms of participation in this model. These leaders in coordination with family program coordinators, counselors, or teachers are generally responsible for outreach to parents. Some examples of the ways school personnel try to reach or invite parents to events or to get them involved include:

- printed memos or letters home in English or sometimes Spanish (De Gaetano 2007, Delgado Gaitan 2012),
- evening meetings with potlucks (De Gaetano 2007) or food provided, and
- flyers in neighborhoods about meetings or events (De Gaetano 2007).

Through these methods, schools then “expect parents to know how to communicate with educators” (Delgado Gaitan 2012, p. 307) via phone or email, even if parents do not have access to internet or are able to write. While parents might be busy in multiple activities at the school, they occupy a passive role in authentic decision-making, especially about the terms of involvement.

For instance, the leaders of parent-teacher associations (PTA) may make decisions about the types of activities the organizations do, but they maintain “a passive role in the maintenance of school culture” (Shirley 1997, p. 73). Although the PTA and other parent-teacher groups have been strong advocates for the interests of families throughout their histories (Haar 2002, Woyshner 2009), some scholars see the PTA and other forms of school-sanctioned parent-teacher collaborations as a form of parent management, especially of middle-class parents who can be seen as nagging or especially difficult for teachers to deal with (Cutler 2000, p. 56). Scholars point to a key semantic difference between “involvement” and “engagement.” In the conventional model, involvement is minimal, at times passive participation (Delgado Gaitan 2012, Olivos et al. 2011, Shirley 1997). According to López & Stoelting (2010), under this model the main evaluative measures schools use to judge the effectiveness of their events is literally “a parent’s physical presence at certain school-based functions,” essentially an attendance count (p. 21). This is contrasted with “engagement,” which is seen as more active and, ideally, more equitable (Olivos 2006, Olivos et al. 2011, Shirley 1997).

*What are the goals of parent involvement and engagement in this model?* Often the main goal within this model is to improve student achievement. It is seen that in order to do so, educators must improve parent participation in school-based activities, particularly ones that help promote student learning, like shared reading practices or helping with homework (Jeynes 2012). Evidence for this is found in the fact that one of the basic starting points for discussion of parent involvement is around the achievement gap. Almost every discussion of parent involvement starts with this problem of US schools.

An even more poignant place to see this goal demonstrated is in the literature on parent involvement in the early childhood years (ages 3-5). Parents are called children’s

first teachers and tasked with practicing school-like activities at home before children enter kindergarten. These tasks may consist of learning and reading activities, reviewing the alphabet, or participating in transition programs and visits to schools (McIntyre 2007). Ultimately, the goal is for students to be prepared to read and succeed in school, so that they do not fail later, which often is discussed as a seemingly inevitable risk for students of color or from low-income backgrounds. As Wildenger & McIntyre (2010) explain, “factors associated with social and economic disadvantage place children at an elevated risk for poor transition and early school failure” (p. 2). These children are “at risk given the lack of community and family resources” (p. 2). In other words, children with “social and economic disadvantage,” principally students of color, who speak another language than English, and from low-income backgrounds, are at risk because of their families and communities. At the same time, their parents are charged with helping them overcome these risks. Parents and families are both a problem and a solution in this model.

*How do Latino families participate in this model?* Several scholars claim that traditional models may be outside the cultural knowledge of some parents, such as immigrant parents, parents from working-class or poor families, and other parents of color who are marginalized from schools (Delgado Gaitan 1992, Valdés 1996, López 2001, Lareau 2003, Olivos 2006). Cruz (2008) notes how “behaviors sanctioned by schools reflect the dominant middle-class European-American culture, thus failing to legitimize the ways in which marginalized families are involved in their children’s education” (p. 5). Despite Epstein’s (2009) own defense of the generalizability of her typology, López & Stoelting (2010) contend that her framework “engenders culture- and class-specific renderings of involvement that not only privilege particular involvement acts but render marginalized parents as ‘uninvolved,’ when they fail to perform them” (p. 26).

Going back to specific examples of how schools reach out to families, one might ask, “how is a potluck meeting not welcoming to Latino families?” or “why wouldn’t printed memos work for outreach with Latino families?” Potlucks (*convivios* in Spanish) and memos or letters (*cartas* in Spanish) in and of themselves are not excluding practices, but taken within the context of a school and particular family one can understand how despite good intentions, certain overtures fail to produce increases in involvement. In our interview, Martha described how it’s only been recently (in the past five years) that her children’s schools have sent letters home in Spanish. Previously, she would receive them and not know what they said or who to ask for translation. More recently, she has had issues with teachers who insist on communicating via email. For Martha, this is especially difficult because her family does not have a computer at home. Also, because she works most days and evenings she has a hard time making it to her local library to check her email more than once or twice a week. Further, both she and her husband struggle to make it to events at the school in the evenings. Martha said she has gone for

meetings and sometimes they have childcare for her younger child, but she admits “*me cuesta ir cada ves*” (it’s hard for me to go every time) especially when meetings are done in English or seem more for socializing. For Martha, since she has so little time at home with her children, potlucks to get to know the teachers do not seem like valuable time because she works so much. She does not see the time as an informal parent-teacher conference to get to know the teacher and ask questions about her son’s progress.

As is already being suggested, Latino families, especially ones that do not speak English or are unfamiliar with US schools, often don’t fair well in this model. It isn’t because Latino parents aren’t trying or that somehow only middle-class, White, English speakers can be successful in this model. It is because one needs a lot of knowledge about US school’s implicit expectations of parents and how to navigate relationships with teachers and school systems, in order to successfully enact parent involvement that is visible and valued by school officials. Since schools have been lead traditionally by the US middle-class mainstream, they often reflect the values and participatory practices that favor this group. In this model, parents must move towards the culture of schools because many schools are not moving towards them in ways that acknowledge the resources Latino families bring with them (Delgado Gaitan 2012, Lindsey & Lindsey 2011).

### *Culturally responsive family-school-community connections*

In contrast with conventional parent involvement models where families are called to adapt to the culture of US schools, culturally responsive family-school-community connections push more responsibility on schools to shift towards understanding the families and communities they seek to serve. As Delgado Gaitan (2012) explains, “immigrants learning a new culture represent only part of the equation. The Euro-American community in power also needs to change in its interactions with immigrants” (p. 308). The main goal of this form of involvement is to create equitable parent-teacher partnerships, where teachers and parents are able to communicate with each other effectively and truly value each other’s contributions to the education of the child. Across several studies that discuss this form of parent involvement, five steps appear crucial to achieving this relationship:

1. *Acknowledge cultural differences and inequalities*: The culture of the teachers and school officials differs from the cultures of Latino families and communities. These cultural differences contribute to and exasperate inequalities in achievement and school resources in low-income neighborhoods.
2. *Grow in respect and knowledge*: School officials must respect, understand, and value the cultures and ways of knowing that students and families bring with them.

3. *Reflect on self and move towards change*: Significant time and effort is required for teachers to learn about cultural differences, reflect on ways they have created barriers to relationships with parents, and change how they relate and connect with families (Lindsey & Lindsey 2011, Delgado Gaitan 2012, p. 308).
4. If educators engage in #2 and #3, *parents will begin to be treated as equals*, whose voice and insights are just as valuable as teachers.
5. Because of increased respect and attention given to families and their cultures, *parents are more likely to engage in schools and support school goals at home*.

“Culturally responsive,” “culturally proficient,” or “culturally competent” are terms that describe an orientation or worldview that is knowledgeable and respectful of different cultures and, according to Lindsey & Lindsey (2011), “an approach for recognizing the bicultural nature of the relationship of parents to schools” (p. 40). In order to understand how this approach to parent-teacher power-sharing relationships relates to the two other models, I utilize the same four questions to analyze this parent involvement model.

*How is parent involvement or engagement defined?* This form of parent involvement is in direct response and critique to the conventional or mainstream forms previously described. However, within culturally responsive family-school-community connections, parent involvement is defined similarly to the conventional model, yet with mention of the multiple ways and places parents are involved in their children’s education. De Gaetano (2007) differentiates between formal and informal forms of parent participation. Formal parent involvement “includes parents’ work in classrooms or in the school,” while informal parent involvement comprises “what parents do at home to help their children’s learning” (p. 150). Parent involvement still supports school-based learning. But, the emphasis is on improving the connections or relationships between teachers and parents, and thus improving how the varying forms of parent involvement are interpreted and esteemed by school staff. In some ways, culturally responsive family-school-community connections aspire to fulfill the promises of the mainstream model defined by the United States Code of Law: “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication, involving student learning and other school activities” (USCS 7801 (32), as cited in Jeynes 2012, p. 707). Strengthening the bonds among schools, families and communities requires a significant change in how schools relate to families.

*Who gets to define it?* In an ideal world, parents, communities, and educators collaborate and decide together how parents will be involved in and around school. According to Delgado Gaitan (2012), culturally responsive family-community-school connections would lead to a “collective process” in which schools create systems to reach out to parents (p. 308). Two examples of culturally responsive models are Lindsey & Lindsey’s (2011) steps towards creating “culturally proficient school communities” and De Gaetano (2007) and her colleagues’ parent and teacher workshops in two California

schools. In The Cross Cultural Demonstration Project, De Gaetano (2007) and her colleagues employed “a collaborative approach in the development and implementation” of their workshops (p. 151). Throughout the three years of their work in two schools, parents were shown many possibilities for participation and chose their own ways of involvement, some electing to lead instructional groups in teachers’ classrooms and others focusing on improving their own home-based activities (p. 152). Creating safe, welcoming spaces where parents’ experiences and beliefs are honored appear to be essential to establishing egalitarian relationships between Latino families and educators.

Another crucial often unstated component in the literature appears to be the willingness and openness of educators and especially principals to allow for such changes in relationships. In De Gaetano’s (2007) study, the principals welcomed opportunities to work with families, individually invited the families to participate, and allowed their staff to attend workshops (p. 152). Lindsey & Lindsey (2011) describe the importance of leadership and how “educators must be willing to have difficult conversations, confront the issues of racism and socioeconomic disparity, and develop the skills to lead and support each other” (p. 55). “Culturally responsive” changes require commitment and investment of time on the part of teachers, staff, and leadership in schools—not simply good intentions or changes of heart. Ultimately, leaders in schools whether teachers, principals, or other staff members will decide to engage in culturally responsive outreach efforts and from there facilitate how parent involvement will be defined. It will be up to these educators to decide to what extent parents and other community members will be able to be equal partners in decision making.

*What are the goals of parent involvement and engagement?* The goals of culturally responsive parent-school-community connections are not only to improve student achievement, but also to improve how students are taught and create more democratic school communities. De Gaetano (2007) explains the connection between improved teaching and learning and the more equity-oriented goals:

A critical part of using a multicultural approach or a culturally responsive approach in schools is the inclusion of students’ families and caregivers in the process of teaching and learning. Ultimately, cultural approaches to schooling are about promoting equity and social justice in the schooling process (p. 148).

Advocates for this model see transforming the relationships between parents and educators as vital to shifting how schools respond to the needs of their students.

Most analyses of these types of programs start with a basic critique of how schools perpetuate inequalities and deficit views of families. From this critique follows a discussion of the importance and value of families’ cultures and the parent’s role as “culture-transmitters” (De Gaetano, p. 148). Often educators’ role as “culture bearers” of dominant middle-class US cultural values is highlighted also (Delgado Gaitan 2012, p. 309). How teachers, administrators, and schools respond to families’ cultures and ways of knowing from their own cultural location and position of power is what must be

changed within this model. Educators themselves must reflect on their role in perpetuating inequalities in their classrooms, particularly how their own actions may be the barriers to parent involvement.

Though much of the work has to be done by educators, the end goal is to increase parent involvement in schools. This parent involvement looks different than the conventional model, but it still seeks for parents to support teaching and learning of children, specifically school-focused goals. While parents, family members, and the community are called to collaborate and participate in more equitable relationships where they can decide the forms their involvement takes, they are tasked with reinforcing the school's mission and improving their children's academic achievement. This is not necessarily a harmful goal for diverse families and communities; however, there may be differences between what parents and community members think their children need compared to what teachers and school officials think they need. For example, educators might think an essential parent involvement activity is for parents help their children with homework, but parents might think that this causes tensions between them and their children. Parents might think their parent involvement should be focused instead on making sure their children have safe places to play near their school. Within this model, however culturally responsive it is, it is still possible for schools and families to disagree. The school's agenda may not be the same as the families' or communities' agendas and goals.

*How do Latino families participate in this model?* Families are called to be equal partners in schools alongside teachers, administrators, and often researchers engaged in programs to promote culturally responsive parent involvement models. For many Latino families, especially families who are unfamiliar with US school culture, this inverts their common experiences of isolation and distance. Schools make conscious efforts to understand their histories and ways of knowing. Several researchers have conducted projects in collaboration with teachers and Latino families to learn how to create culturally responsive programs that address the needs of particular school communities. In addition to the projects previously mentioned by De Gaetano (2007) and Lindsey & Lindsey's (2011) framework for culturally proficient schools, two other projects are described here as they relate to Latino families.

An influential example of a culturally responsive initiative is the work of researchers in "funds of knowledge" projects with teachers and Latino families. Moll et al. (1992) trained and supported teachers in doing research on their students' families' customs and traditions. This helped teachers learn about their students and develop curriculum based on new understandings about Latino families' "funds of knowledge". When teachers approached families seeking to learn from them and no attempt was "made to 'teach' parents or to visit for other school-related reasons," Moll and his colleagues found that teachers were better able to understand "the concrete life experiences of their students" (Moll & Gonzalez 1997, p. 101).



For pre-service teachers in teacher-training programs, Lombos Wlazlinksi & Cummins (2011) assigned the Family Narrative Project (FNP) which aimed to have teachers learn the value of establishing respectful relationships with families, to create books with family life stories, and to offer teachers a deep professional development opportunity (p. 64). In their project, teachers interviewed parents eliciting narratives about their life histories. The researchers found that Latino and bicultural parents' experiences and stories "teach important lessons of survival, courage, perseverance, sacrifice, humility, and resilience" (p. 72). Both Lombos Wlazlinksi & Cummins' (2011) and Moll & Gonzalez's (1997) work appear to suggest that through improved relationships based on equality and mutual respect, schools themselves can be transformed.

Culturally responsive family-community-school connections seek to promote more egalitarian relationships between parents and schools. This is seen as an empowering transformation for Latino families and other communities of color from working-class or low-income backgrounds. However, two potential issues might arise from these more school- and researched-based initiatives. First, because the emphasis is on what school officials must do, often the sacrifices required of families is left unexamined. Moves to increase educators' understanding require families to share themselves and welcome educators into their world, perhaps into their homes or neighborhoods. This requires trust built over time, through many positive interactions. For parents who may be undocumented or have families members who are, inviting teachers or other school representatives into their homes may make them vulnerable. Families may not feel they have much choice on whether to participate or not. If they avoid invitations or requests for visits for lack of trust in school officials, they might be seen as uncooperative (much in the same way they might have been seen in more conventional parent involvement models). Second, the initial impetus for change must come from school officials themselves, often alongside the assistance of a researcher or facilitator who helps them decipher ways to create culturally competent or responsive approaches to engaging families. Although educators engage in processes of self-reflection and attempt to change how they relate to families, there still exist real power differences between parents and teachers. No challenge has been made to the basic inequalities within school structures, partly because families are recipients of the responsiveness and not the initial force for change themselves. As will be discussed in the next section, this is a fundamental difference compared to more empowerment focused, community-based parent engagement initiatives.

### *Empowerment models of parent involvement & community organizing*

Empowerment models of parent involvement or engagement seek to change basic inequalities within the school system. In fact, these models exist not to reinforce parent

involvement at all, but to directly challenge passive notions of parent involvement and change unequal power relationships between school officials and communities traditionally disenfranchised by schools (namely, communities of color, low-income or working-class communities, immigrants, and people who do not speak English at home) (Olivos et al. 2011, Shirley 1997, 2010, Warren 2010). The focus is on true power-sharing (Delgado Gaitan 2012, p. 310), where the power is occupied and won by the communities and families themselves—not given by well meaning teachers or administrators. This isn't just for better relationships with teachers and school staff, but for parents and communities to fight for their own goals and agenda.

Many different scholars, educational reformers, community activists, and policymakers use the word “empowerment” in describing their efforts at engaging parents and families. But, what is considered empowerment and how it is enacted differs greatly. In some models, empowerment is only possible when parents, families, and communities themselves come to fight for their interests. For others, empowerment can be reached in a journey alongside community organizers, who help incite thought and coordinate community members to figure out their agenda for action. Still more see empowerment possible through collaboration with mediators or facilitators, like researcher allies<sup>11</sup> and community organizations, who help train parents to become advocates and activists for school reform. Ultimately, there are common themes across these views of empowerment that help distinguish “empowerment models” from conventional or culturally responsive power-relationships. Most empowerment models:

- Consist of parent-, family- or community member-lead initiatives (sometimes community organizer involved, but not school lead),
- Have agendas set by community members, outside of the school and perhaps not focused initially on school or educational goals,
- Involve increase in community member knowledge of the school system and a politics of education, including an understanding of their rights and how to organize themselves to advocate for change (Shirley 1997, Delgado Gaitan 2012, Delgado Gaitan 1992), and
- Affirm and value family and community knowledge and experiences.

Three main types of empowerment models include: *community organizing for school reform* (education organizing for short (Lopez 2003) and often in partnership with non-profit community organizations), *local parent-lead initiatives* (which sometimes lead to

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<sup>11</sup> “Research allies” are researchers, mostly academic, who align themselves with the efforts of community organizations that seek education reform (Oakes & Rogers 2006). Most researchers who study such efforts are proponents of the movements. Some researchers go so far as to work alongside the organizations, as consultants. Others try to take a more “objective” approach, but generally all see it as their goal to assist and promote such efforts.

the establishment of parent-lead organizations or groups), and *popular education workshops and programs* influenced by Paulo Freire's (1970/2000, 1974/2007) work.

*How is parent involvement or engagement defined?* Often empowerment models, particularly education organizing movements, do not address "parent involvement" directly, unless critiquing it. Epstein & Dauber (1991) discuss collaboration with community organizations, including private agencies, businesses and other groups, as a form of parent involvement that teachers should encourage. For them, community organizing is complementary to conventional parent involvement activities and school outreach. Shirley (1997) critiques conventional parent involvement models directly and describes it in opposition to community organizing efforts in Texas. Shirley (1997) argues that the difference "warrants a terminological distinction between *accommodationist* forms of parental *involvement* and *transformationalist* forms of parental *engagement*" (p. 73, emphasis in original). He adds that in community organizing efforts, parents transform their role in schools: from passive consumers to active citizens (Shirley 1997, p. 73). Warren (2010) adds that the problem with "family-school-community partnerships" is that most of these "represent efforts to get parents to support the schools agenda" (p. 6).

Olivos, Ochoa, & Jiménez-Castellanos (2011) differentiate between parent involvement and *bicultural parent engagement*, defining "bicultural" as "linguistically and culturally diverse" (p. 2). They argue for a "transformative manner of parent involvement [...] in which bicultural parents assume key roles as catalysts and change agents in the inequitable institution" of US schools (p. 10). In this way, bicultural parent engagement transcends passive forms of parent involvement, because parents are active advocates and leaders in reform. Olivos et al. (2011) go on to define parent engagement as "an active, two-way connection that is an inclusive, ongoing, and engaged process through mutual agreement and that has direct benefits to the student/family" (p. 11). In this way, they connect ideas of empowerment with culturally responsive family-community-school connections, because in their model schools must engage as well.

*Who gets to define it?* Within empowerment models, ideally community members, families, and parents themselves get to define what it means for parents to be engaged in and around schools or in their communities. Community members set the agenda to address the concerns of the larger community. How the agenda is set and whose voice is heard depends greatly on the type of empowerment model employed: education organizing, parent-led initiatives, or popular education programs.

Community organizing for school reform (i.e. education organizing) is defined as "the actions of parents and other residents of marginalized communities to transform low-performing schools towards higher performance through an 'intentional building of power'" (Lopez 2003, p. 2). Often such actions begin through concerted community organizing by professional organizers, from non-profit, grassroots organizations started by local community members or larger community organizations, like the Association of

Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) or PICO National Network<sup>12</sup> (Shirley 2010). Most of these organizations attempt to address a broad range of issues. Organizations can be race- or ethnically-based, religious or geographically focused (Shirley 2010). How organizers come to engage a community will depend on local contexts and pre-existing relationships among community members. There may be particular parents selected to host meetings at their home or singled out for special training to lead a rally at the school (Shirley 1997). How community organizers and members come to consensus on which issues to organize or advocate around will influence how an agenda is set and whose voice is heard. While certainly their efforts seek to empower all and fight for equality, they may encounter difficulties in ensuring truly democratic decision-making.

Local parent-led initiatives in many ways may not differ from education organizing efforts. They are grassroots efforts started by community members themselves, often without formal organization structures initially or direct ties to larger or national non-profit community organizations. In Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis' (2012) studies of three Latino parent participatory programs, the *La Familia* Initiative is an example of a parent-created and lead group, which was founded by five mothers with children at a local middle school and grew exponentially to include most of the Latino parents. Distinguishing features of this group were rotating leadership positions, "promoting collective decision making, and the development of voice and leadership among all participants" (p. 73). As they document in other studies (Jasis 2000, Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis 2005), parents' work was done outside and independent of the school (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis' 2012). In this space of intentional power sharing, there appears to be potential for more equitable forms of decision-making, though certainly all groups have to contend with local relationship dynamics and histories. Two other prominent examples is the collaborative research done by Delgado Gaitan (1992) in her work with the Mexican-American community of Carpentería, California and more recently Dyrness (2011) in her work with Latina women in the group *Madres Unidas* (Mothers United).

Popular education workshops and programs tend to involve groups seeking to do empowerment work vis-à-vis Freirian approaches to family literacy. A hallmark of this approach is Freire's *conscientização* (critical consciousness) model, in which the act of reflection itself is transformative and leads to larger structural transformations by participants and facilitators, particularly engaged researchers (Johansson & Lindhult 2008, p. 109). Beckett, Glass, & Moreno (2013) studied a popular education family literacy program in Los Angeles. They found that the workshops helped parents build their capacity "to challenge deficit constructs of Latino immigrant parents and to work towards building parent empowerment by redefining their involvement in their children's education" (p. 8). The workshops allowed parents to construct their own definitions of

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<sup>12</sup> Formerly People Improving Communities through Organizing, and before that Pacific Institute for Community Organizing

involvement in a safe space, in order to confront US school conventional deficit models. Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez (2013) review several Freirian school-based parent-organizing initiatives. While they acknowledge the way such approaches problematize conventional parent involvement models, they contend, “Freirian approaches might elide existing (and real) power dynamics” (p. 166). Citing Rocha-Schmid (2010), they add, “despite their best intentions, facilitators (here we add researchers) and teachers engage in relationships of domination with parents, shaping discussions based on their own identities, ideologies, and interests” (p. 166). As in the case with professional organizers, it is very possible for the most well intentioned facilitator to engage in disempowering practices in how s/he structures conversation or inserts his/her thoughts into discussion.

*What are the goals of parent involvement and engagement?* Empowerment models seek to strengthen parent voices and animate community members to advocate and fight for better, more equitable schools. Like the conventional and culturally responsive power relationship, empowerment models seek to end the achievement gap. They seek to do so not by getting more parents to be involved in school-based activities, but by galvanizing community members, particularly parents, to exert political pressure on policymakers, district officials, and principals to change schools.

Many education organizing efforts are responses to failed school reform strategies and inequities, particularly in urban public schools (Gold, Simon, & Brown 2002, Fruchter 2009, Oakes & Rogers 2006, René & McAlister 2011, Shirley 1997, 2009, 2010, Warren 2010). Empowerment models take into account the structural reasons for student failure and the achievement gap. Inequality is itself failure—not individualized child failure. Children are “at-risk” for inadequate education, not for fault of their own. Families are not seen as deficient or lacking for cultural, social, or linguistic reasons. They live in communities that often lack economic resources or, before organizing, political clout to pressure policymakers and school districts to reform schools. Larger economic and political structures are generally to blame, but so too are particular superintendents, principals, teachers, politicians, and other officials who end up the targets of community criticism and attack.

*How do Latino families participate in this model?* Latino families are a central focus of much of the empowerment-oriented parent involvement literature. Latino parents who wish to join with other parents often learn how to navigate and evaluate the school system and confront inequitable social structures here in the US. Some parents or other family members, like older brothers or sisters, *tías* or *tíos* (aunts or uncles), or *abuelos* (grandparents) may become leaders within organizing efforts, build their skills to host neighborhood meetings, create agendas for organizing, and facilitate rallies or assemblies with school officials (Shirley 1997, Oakes & Rogers 2006).

Latino families may use their own social networks, cultural resources, and personal strengths to help them organize and advocate for their children on their terms.

They may build on cultural values and practices such as ones documented by Valdés (1996) in her influential study with Mexican-origin families. Values like *educación* (the Spanish cognate for education) “has a much broader meaning and includes both manners and moral values” (p. 125) and *respeto* (respect for others and a sense of integrity for oneself) may provide a foundation for mutual understanding. Community members might also share *consejos* (advice) especially through narrative stories with examples from the parents’ own lives or the lives of other acquaintances (p. 125; Reese et al. 1995, p. 68). In order to get *vecinos* (neighbors) or *compadres* (close friends) to join them, parent and family organizers may call on “collective dedication” to each other (*tequio*), based on shared histories of struggle, solidarity in communities hostile to immigrants (particularly undocumented migrants), and increasing desires to resist inequalities (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis 2012).

The role of community organizers and research allies requires reflection on the part of the facilitators or mediators, as well as on-going evaluation by community members themselves. What is their role in the empowerment process? Do they see themselves as “giving power” or “raising up parents”? Are facilitators sharing their own opinions or trying to remain more neutral when community members discuss their goals? What interests do these outsiders (or even insider-outsiders<sup>13</sup>) have in organizing with Latino families? Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez (2013) contend, “these approaches are invariably mediated exchanges with a researcher, a parent trainer/leader, a facilitator, or some other institutional agent that ‘empowers’ parents in order for them to be able to produce change” (p. 168). This could potentially lead to another form of deficit thinking: parents themselves lack in “critical consciousness” or empowerment (p. 168).

### **Promising Parent Involvement & Engagement Practices for Oregon**

Oregon is poised to address the needs of the growing Latino community in its educational system, given policies like Governor Kitzhaber’s 40-40-20 plan<sup>14</sup>, multi-sector initiatives like Cradle to Career<sup>15</sup> in Multnomah County, and increases in dialogue between

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<sup>13</sup> Community organizers and researchers (such as the myself) may be “insiders” and “outsiders”: “insider in ethnic identity” but “not an insider in the organization or in the community” (Baca Zinn 2001, p. 162). For example, I am a middle-class 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Mexican American mother. I share an ethnic identity (Latina, Mexican-American), but outside of the time doing my ethnographic study, I am an outsider in terms of where I live, my own education, social class, status as a US citizen, and other social, cultural, and economic differences between me and the communities I work with.

<sup>14</sup> “Oregon’s goal is that by the year 2025, 100 percent of Oregonians will earn a high school diploma or its equivalent, 40 percent will earn a post-secondary credential, and 40 percent will obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher” (Oregon Education Investment Board, n.d.).

<sup>15</sup> “The Cradle to Career partnership is long-term and county-wide, and includes early childhood, K-12 schools, higher education, local business, government, non-profit organizations, faith community, parents, students and community stakeholders, with the goal of ensuring the sustained success of every child in Portland and Multnomah County from cradle to career” (Portland Schools Foundation, n.d.).

policymakers and Latino community leaders made possible through advocacy work done by the Oregon Commission on Hispanic Affairs, the Oregon Latino Agenda for Action, CAUSA and many other community organizations and agencies around the state. Given this context, what are some promising parent involvement and engagement practices for Oregon? Which forms of parent involvement and engagement will work better in the context of this emerging immigrant destination, with a growing multi-ethnic, multilingual Latino population?

In reviewing the three types of power sharing relationships and models outlined by Delgado Gaitan (2012), several insights emerge for improving current parent involvement models or creating new avenues for Latino parent engagement in Oregon. Conventional or mainstream parent involvement models often tend to describe the most common forms of parent involvement expected in US schools. The problem with these models is not overt exclusion of Latino families, communities of color, immigrants, families that speak languages other than English, or families from low-income backgrounds. The problem with conventional models is that they create universals about what all families and parents should do in schools that are assumed egalitarian. The models do not acknowledge cultural differences in parental practices or unequal relationships between middle-class, college-educated, credentialed school officials and parents who do not hold the same credentials or expertise about schooling in the US. Conventional models, especially the typologies of Epstein (1995, 2001, 2009), are popular in schools because they just magically seem to fit into schools as they are. They seem and feel “right” because of larger, pervasive ideologies around how parents “should” relate and participate in US schools. These ideologies are often culturally specific to middle-class European-Americans.

Culturally responsive connections and empowerment models are not perfect models. But, together they hold more potential for addressing the needs of increasingly diverse student populations and the needs of a school system trying to shift its practices to better serve a changing student demographic in Oregon. Both schools and diverse families need parent involvement and engagement models that acknowledge inequalities within schools, the strengths and resources of all Oregon families, and the potential for better schools and better partnerships. Oregon schools and communities of color, especially the Latino community, need a multi-faceted approach to engaging and involving families and parents in and around schools, taking the best of culturally responsive connections and empowerment models.

*Key insights from culturally responsive & empowerment models:*

- Teachers, administrators, and policymakers should increase understanding of Latino communities and other communities of color in the state **on the communities’ terms** and from a **strengths-based** perspective.

Learning about a community on the “community’s terms” can be difficult and fraught with issues of representation, but creating relationships with grassroots organizations with direct ties to community members can facilitate connections. Community organizations can help bridge relationships between schools and communities and assist in re-centering discussion from a deficiency view to a strengths-based perspective. Strengths-based approaches to understanding Latino families require educators to reflect on their own implicit prejudices about families from low-income backgrounds or cultures different than their own. Thinking in terms of “strengths” versus deficiencies combats prevalent deficit thinking around discussions of “at risk” families or students, which tend to equate social class, race, ethnicity, and language with risk factors in school (McDermott et al. 2008).

- School leaders, engaged with community members and family advocates from diverse communities, should **critically evaluate** their current parent and family outreach and engagement practices.

Critical evaluation should be done in a culturally responsive way. Lindsey & Lindsey (2011) offer a “Parent and Community Communication and Outreach Rubric,” which helps schools analyze how they reach out to communities. These evaluations can be strengthened through support and feedback from individuals and leaders from the communities themselves. Too often schools hire experts, researchers, or other consultants who have little to no experience with the local context. Although perhaps “evidence-based” and of high quality, technical reform expertise may not produce the same results as reforms enhanced by local knowledge or a deep understanding of cultural differences and responsiveness. In their work with community organizers and groups in California, Oakes & Rogers (2006) found that

“the most formidable barriers reside less in the technical challenges of designing equitable schools, and more in the *cultural norms about race, merit, and schooling* that underlie the status quo and, for so many people, make specific equity responses so difficult to accept” (p. 14, my emphasis).

Though it is never guaranteed that community organizers or members will be able to ensure these underlying cultural issues get addressed, having a diversity of perspectives, particularly those with intimate knowledge of the relationship between a school and its community, appears more likely to result in discussion around these issues.

- Community organizations, especially those doing work in educational issues, should help parents and families **develop their own voices and agendas, while attentive to systems of privilege and differences** within communities of color.



Community organizations can offer a safe place for Latino families and community members to reflect and debate their concerns around the schooling of their children. Shirley (2010) defines community organizations as independent, non-partisan, non-profit organizations that are not advocacy or social movements “driven by single issues” and not directed at “establishing programs” (p. 174). Although applicable in areas like Texas where Shirley (1997) did his research or places with longer histories of communities organization like Los Angeles or Oakland, California, in a state like Oregon, especially for the Latino community, there are fewer community organizations and non-profit agencies. In Oregon, many community organizations operate as hybrid organizations, occupying multiple roles to serve their community of interest: organizing community members for particular issues (e.g. in support of Tuition Equity), providing programs and direct services (like translation or support groups), or direct advocacy and lobbying to state legislators or other policymakers. For the Latino community, this is especially true in rural areas of the state where there are fewer Latino-focused organizations or supports.

Within this context, where there are fewer resources for organizations doing multiple jobs, how community organizers and leaders represent and speak for their base is particularly delicate. As mentioned before, Oregon is home to both newer immigrants from Latin America, particularly from Mexico and Guatemala, and US-born Latinos. While these groups share ethnicity, sometimes languages, religions and customs, US-born Latinos, particularly those who are third and fourth generation (such as myself), do not have the same experiences of US schools as immigrants and their children. Yet, often these US-born Latinos, fluent in English and with perhaps greater access to institutions and positions of leadership, are called upon to speak for the whole diverse community (Jiménez 2010). Ensuring that all Latino voices are heard in Oregon requires US-born Latinos, particularly in leadership positions, to engage in direct contact with all Latinos, including Spanish-dominant immigrants and their families. This can be difficult given language and cultural differences, but is vital to understanding all experiences and allowing all Latinos to voice their concerns in their own words. Creating a broad-based, multilingual, multiethnic, multiracial, and multigenerational Latino coalition is essential to pushing schools and policymakers to serve all Latinos. Joining forces with other communities of color and diverse communities will only strengthen this movement.

## **Conclusion**

Parent involvement is a widely studied and supported concept in education. Although there is extensive support for the idea that parents—especially parents of color, immigrants, and parents with low incomes—be involved in their children’s schooling, often community members, parents, school officials, researchers, and policymakers disagree on how parent involvement is defined, what its goals are, and who gets to define and lead initiatives. At the heart of debates on parent involvement in US schools, lie

issues of culture, language, and power (Delgado Gaitan 2012). Latino families, especially newer immigrants who have less experience with US schools, carry with them understandings from their home countries and cultural expectations about what parents should do to educate their children. These understandings do not always fit with US school expectations, which often reflect middle-class, European-American values and practices.

What is at stake is not simply the problem of cultural misunderstandings. Cultural misunderstandings are inextricably connected to issues of power and knowledge between credentialed, expert educators and families unfamiliar with US school culture. As Martha encountered when her son's middle school teachers blamed her for not ensuring Rogelio was at grade-level in reading and writing, even when Latino parents care and worry deeply about how their children are doing in school, they can be seen as uninvolved in their children's education and one reason for their children's failure. In states that face significant achievement gaps between White students and other students of color like Oregon, these judgments undermine educators' daily efforts at creating more equitable educational opportunities for all students. School districts and states may continue to push different technical reform strategies (e.g. facility upgrades, increase funding, changing curriculum, changing accountability systems). But, if educators, policymakers, researchers, and community members do not also address how schools think about and treat low-income families and communities of color, schools will continue to reflect and reproduce US societal inequalities rather than ensuring equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, and social class.

In Oregon, Hispanic students represent 21.04% of all Oregon public school students (Oregon Department of Education 2012). Yet, there exist gaps in academic achievement and participation in high achieving courses like Talented and Gifted Programs (TAG) between Hispanic/Latino students and White students (p. 20, 74). How Latino parents and communities relate to schools is an important component of current initiatives to improve Oregon schools such as the Governor's 40-40-20 plan. Parents and communities of color also are increasingly seeking to address school inequities around the state.

A key step in transforming how Oregon schools relate and reach out to Latino families is to unite culturally responsive parent involvement programs with empowerment and community organizing models. In employing the best of both of these approaches, three insights emerge for Oregon:

- Teachers, administrators, and policymakers should increase understanding of Latino communities and other communities of color in the state **on the communities' terms** and from a **strengths-based** perspective.

- School leaders, engaged with community members and family advocates from diverse communities, should **critically evaluate** their current parent and family outreach and engagement practices.
- Community organizations, especially those doing work in educational issues, should help parents and families **develop their own voices and agendas, while attentive to systems of privilege and differences** within communities of color.

Cultural responsive practices from schools and more empowering parent leadership roles alone cannot change schools. Technical, school-only reforms themselves are insufficient as well. School-only reforms are inadequate because problems “lie embedded in systems of structural inequalities based on race and poverty” (Warren 2010, p.4). Empowerment and culturally responsive parent engagement forms must be incorporated with multiple change strategies, like increased funding, improved curriculum, and other institutional changes (Shirley 2009, 2010; Warren et al. 2009). Together these approaches allow schools, families, communities, policymakers, and researchers to tackle the political, social and cultural realities of Oregon schools, in order to accomplish the transformational and ambitious reforms policymakers and community leaders seek.

### *The promise of Martha*

In my March 2012 interview with Martha Bonilla and my many interactions with her, she has always offered me advice as a Latina mother. For Martha, she and I need to be involved as Latina mothers not because our families lack in necessary emotional or physical resources to support our children’s educational success. In her view, Latino parents cannot count on teachers in US schools to communicate in understandable and respectful ways or ensure our children’s access to equitable educational opportunities. For Martha, parent involvement is absolutely necessary to make sure teachers and schools are accountable to the students they serve.

Since that fateful meeting with her son Rogelio’s middle school teachers when Martha realized how far behind her son was, she has attended countless parent education classes offered by local community organizations and in the school district where her children attend school. Martha goes to all the school meetings she can (even if they are in English, she’ll get up and speak in Spanish). She has attended and graduated from the district’s parent leadership program and is a strong advocate for her children and other Latino children in her community. Martha can detail different parental rights according to the US Elementary and Secondary Education Act (commonly called “No Child Left Behind” or as she refers to it, *la ley*, the law), as well as explain intricate differences between schools in the US and in Mexico, helping someone like me understand why Latino immigrant parents might relate to school as they do.

At the same time, Martha doesn't feel comfortable helping her children with their homework. Although I would say Martha *se defiende en inglés* (she gets by well enough in English) having heard her speak to someone at her son's school, Martha would say she doesn't speak or read English well. She would also say her writing in Spanish isn't too good because she only went through fourth grade. She is quick to downplay her intelligence and understanding, but her stories, her descriptions of life here in the US, and her lived experiences show her personal strength, wisdom, and keen insights. While Martha's tenacity as an advocate is exceptional, in my experiences with many Latino immigrant parents, her love, dedication, and resolve to give her children *una vida mejor* (a better life) than her own is common.

Many Latino parents in Oregon want the same things most parents in the US want for their children: for them to be happy, healthy, successful, well-mannered, good people. All parents define those qualities and raise their children differently, but the love and hope is no different. The resolve to leave one's home and walk across a desert, to face uncertainties and dangers in place like Los Angeles, San Jose, or San Francisco, to moving over and over again all the way up to Oregon to find work to send money to loved ones back home, then facing the reality that often one cannot go back home and one needs to make this new country home are huge hurdles and accomplishments. Latino migrants don't do it alone; often they rely on social networks to get them to an established community and hopefully can access local resources to help them as they build lives here in Oregon. It is unknown exactly how many Latino parents and families in Oregon have done this. But, with the Latino/Hispanic population of Oregon growing 70% between 1980-1990 and then over 140% between 1990-2000 (Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza 2010, p. 139), it is certain that many Latino parents of children currently in Oregon's schools traversed the difficult, often uncertain, migratory road up the west coast to Oregon, much like Martha did in the mid-1990s. These parents and their children, alongside US-born Latino families, are the future of Oregon and the United States. It is up to educators, administrators, policymakers, researchers, and community members to acknowledge our cultural differences and build on the strengths and promise of parents like Martha and families to help improve our schools.

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**Note:**



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