

THE PRAXIS OF LEARNING: NEGOCIANDO THE RULES OF PARENTAL  
INVOLVEMENT WITH HISPANIC PARENTS

by

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(Under the Direction of JoBeth Allen)

ABSTRACT

Game theory holds that human relationships can be analyzed from the perspective of a game: all people involved interact within certain rules, using specific strategies to achieve a goal or payoff. This dissertation examines parental involvement of Hispanic families from the perspectives of game theory (Bourdieu, 1990), participatory action research (Fals Borda, 2001) and critical education (Freire, 1982) to ascertain how parents and teachers in a U.S. public elementary school interacted (or not) around their aspirations for the children entrusted to them. The research was conducted with an average of seventeen parents of thirty-seven third-grade students, with data gathered from meeting and interview transcripts, journals, field notes and school documents.

Chapters one and two establish my position as a player in a very serious game: teacher, researcher, Hispanic, lifelong learner. Chapter three explores the relationship between achievement and current models of parental involvement, suggesting a need for critical learning among all players. Chapter four details the research process and provides basic statistical information about the families. In chapters five through seven I document how the parents used strategies discovered with the group of co-investigators to enhance learning for their children and

to learn with them. As a result, they helped their children make important connections between print, life, and learning. Through dialogic exchanges and critical examination of their daily practices, they challenged oppression and myths as they pondered the influence of such concepts on family life and on the child's learning. Positioned in the middle as a researcher-initiator of this process, I encouraged a joint game to include teachers, parents, and students, refocusing on the child's welfare as the goal. Chapter eight summarizes the public and private games these parents played.

This research suggests that parental involvement must be reassessed and reconceptualized as a process of mutual learning in which all involved players, focusing on the child's learning and development as their ultimate and common goal, critically analyze their day-to-day experiences in the context of oppression and power relationships.

**INDEX WORDS:** Critical Education, Empowerment, Game Theory, Multicultural Education, Parental Involvement, Participatory Action Research, Teacher Research.

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## DEDICATION

To Luis Urdanivia Otárola, my father, my inspiration, my mentor, my rock. A man who  
believed every person has the right to an education.

To all Hispanic families who struggle for a better life in the United States. I admire and respect  
their tenacity to overcome adversity, their humility, resilience, and their immense love for their  
children.

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Finally, Dear Lord, help me always remember your purpose for guiding me to this path of learning with parents and children. Thanks for using me to accomplish your will.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Whether or not we are willing to overcome slips or inconsistencies, by living humility, lovingness, courage, tolerance, competence, decisiveness, patience-impatience, and verbal parsimony, we contribute to creating . . . a school that thinks, that participates, that creates, that speaks, that loves, that guesses, that passionately embraces and says yes to life. It is not a school that quiets down and quits. (Paulo Freire, 1998a, p. 45).*

This research was born of multidimensional love: First, the love of, and for, a man who cared to learn about me, to learn with me, and to guide me through life. A man who shared his experiences about life and death with me: My father.

Second, a love for the children I teach, directly or through my example. Precious children who are unaware of the struggles around them, who go through life experiencing hope and confusion and yet, manage to survive in a complex world created by both, caring and uncaring adults. Such a love extends to their families, who search for better possibilities for their children and for themselves. Love is at the core of my teaching practice: A love for my profession and an understanding of my political role as a teacher and learner. Whether I intended it or not, teaching makes me a leader for the families and the children with whom I interact.

The right to an education is a fundamental human right. Education should enable individuals to improve their living conditions, which will, in turn, enhance the living conditions of the groups in which they interact (i.e., family and community).

True education is critical, active, and takes place in all the spheres of life. People learn together as they interact in public (i.e., school, community) and private (i.e., family) spheres: Therefore, teaching is learning, and in many ways, learning is teaching.

Learning involves the learner's totality: previous experiences, cultural values, and expectations for the future. It is a product of interaction and, in Freire's terms, *praxis*. Praxis is a dynamic tension, the point at which theory meets practice. It allows for the generation of new theories *and* practices. Such is at the core of critical education, an education that encourages options, choice, and liberating action.

Because learning is accomplished through interactions, the family plays an important role in the education of children; however, the families of marginalized groups are not usually acknowledged as an important part in such an education. In this dissertation, I will examine parental involvement of Hispanic parents in a public school in southeast U.S.A. The setting and rationale for the study, including some theories underpinning the methodological choice for this participatory action research, are described in chapter two.

In chapter three, I summarize current theories that have been used to explain the differential achievement of Hispanic children in the U.S. I also discuss parental involvement in relation to academic achievement. In chapter four, I go over the methods for the study and analyze data collected through a survey on the families in this study. In addition to factors affecting academic achievement and parental involvement of the families in this research, chapter five presents some myths about Hispanics that a group of co-researchers uncovered in our meetings, as well as a description of how the group applied Freire's *Circles of Culture* in our analyses. Chapters six and seven are case studies in which I zoomed in on some interactions between the families and the staff at Hope Elementary, and between parents and their children as

reported by the parents and as I observed them throughout the year in which the research was conducted. This chapter reconceptualizes parental involvement as public and private interactions between a parent and her or his child. In chapter eight, I analyze the games played at Hope Elementary in terms of strategy, goals, investments, and outcomes. I also reconceptualize parental involvement as critical educational encounters with the players. The uses of multiple theories to examine parental involvement sought more than understanding this phenomena: It intended to foster *praxis* founded on dialogical interactions, learning the rules and becoming active players, re-shaping the game itself, specifically as to its goals or payoffs, and strategy.

Simply put, parental involvement is every thing a parent does to affect the present and future lives of their children. It happens in public and private realms, and includes parent-child interactions and expectations. In the public level of schooling, Valdés (1996) stated, the goal of parental involvement has to do with *supporting* a child's education, though that support can encompass a number of meanings. Schools expect parents to conform to certain requirements to prepare their children to achieve (i.e., teaching the alphabet, colors, and shapes; providing a home structure for academic learning, "participating" in school-related events to support the curriculum and help raise money for the school.) However, other researchers have argued that that parental involvement takes place in several domains including the home and the workplace, (López, 2001; Voss, 1993) and that parenting traits and practices are an important component in enhancing academic achievement (Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, and Bertrand, 1997; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Lam, 1997).

The question of whether and how Hispanic parents get involved in the lives of their children remains. As I set out to learning about the rules of the new society in which I was immersed, I began to explore the topic of parental involvement of Hispanics in several ways, and

continue to learn as I interact with new students, teachers, and parents. An outline of my journey is presented below.

### *Timeline*

1999 through present: Review of literature on parental involvement, conducted over a period of more than four years (summarized in chapters 1 and 2), as well as journaling, field notes, reflection, , and dialogues with my relatives and friends, provided the background and philosophical foundation to begin my search and to test new learning throughout the journey.

Summer of 2000 and Spring 2001: A pilot study, conducted in Pasto (Colombia, South America) and Xalapa (Mexico), with the twofold aim of getting a sense for what parental involvement in the education of children is like in both places, and to collect information that would guide my research in the U.S.A. In the pilot study, I interviewed a total of 13 people to learn about their views and experiences about rearing and/or educating children in public schools. Some of these participants were parents, some were teachers, and some were both parents and teachers. The pilot study is summarized in appendix A.

School year 2001 – 2002: A participatory action research for which I invited all parents of the 37 students I taught during the year of this study at Hope Elementary. Only 23 parents of 20 students signed a participation agreement. Seventeen mothers attended the meetings alone and two attended with their husbands. Only one father participated without his wife due to difficulties with babysitting for a child with a disability. Although there were Mexican and Salvadoran parents in the group, only Mexican parents agreed to participate and/or attend the meetings.

To accommodate the needs of the majority of parents, the meetings were held on Saturday afternoons. Some meetings were held twice in the week to allow interested parents to

attend without compromising their work schedule. Additionally, communication with these parents was carried out through letters, telephone conversations, audiotaped messages, and informal meetings when the parents dropped by the school and my schedule allowed me to talk with them, or at school-wide meetings such as PTO and fundraisers. The meetings focused on topics of interest to the parents as stated by them or as identified in our informal interactions and during interpretations at parent-staff meetings in the school.

Throughout the school year 2001-2002, I collected data in several ways: meetings, journaling, school documents, and interviews. By providing the parents with summaries and whole transcripts of our meetings, and by engaging in face-validity (Lather, 1980) meetings with them, I returned the information to the community, a necessary step in participatory action research. Both at individual meetings and in whole group meetings, the co-researchers engaged in joint analysis that in many cases, led to action about the topics we discussed. For an example of group analysis and its correspondence to Freire's (1982) *Circles of Culture*, see chapter 5.

Summer 2002 through present. The research group evolved into a small writing group of 6 mothers, a product of our interactions in the large group. The writing group met after the school year was over, and continued to hold bi-monthly meetings to pursue their search for answers to puzzling situations that arise while living in the U.S.A. (Presently, the participants in the writing group are experiencing multiple challenges that have caused the group to hold on the meetings until we overcome such challenges, although we continue to talk on the phone on a monthly basis). A total of sixteen meetings with both the large group and the smaller writing group were audio taped and three were videotaped as well. After every meeting, I transcribed the tapes and gave a summary to the parents within 2 days before our next meeting—and even at the

beginning of every meeting to parents who didn't read them at home—while making available the full transcript for those parents who were interested in reading it.

In addition to meetings and dialogues with the groups that I recorded and transcribed, I documented daily interactions between parents and staff from August 2001 to May 2002 as they occurred. In this study, I refer to my field notes and to in-site documents such as previous school evaluation reports, PTO statutes, communications with parents and to journals that I wrote previous to this research, to exemplify the questions and analyses of the events of the year and a half during which I conducted this research.

Laurel Richardson (1994) argued that writing is a method of inquiry: As the writer engages in the process, he or she discovers new angles and junctures to examine a particular topic. I invite my readers to approach this study with inquiry lenses, for the themes uncovered in the process of researching and writing are broad and intricate. Such complexity forced choices on what to report and about the extent and detail of the analysis, often leaving it up to the reader to make connections with theories and descriptions from previous chapters, and to co-construct such analyses in light of their own previous experiences, taking, or not, on new challenges that this dissertation might present them.

A necessary disclaimer is the use of the term Hispanic over *Latino/a*. I use this term because my co-investigators used Hispanic in the conversations and interactions throughout the research to refer to themselves. It also is my personal preference, as Hispanic is a remainder of the strengths and the weaknesses of our culture, the passion with which we live, love, and work; the mythical ways we approach our world; and the continuing oppression and cultural imposition that started back in 1492 with the arrival of the Spaniards to our continent. Hispanic is a



reminder of my ambiguous identity: born in a family with ties to Spain, Mexico, Peru, and Colombia, a mix of Spaniard, Native, and African.

My deepest thanks go to the parents, third-grade children, and staff at Hope Elementary as well as to the Superintendent of schools and to the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction in the district to which Hope Elementary belongs.

## CHAPTER 2

### IN SEARCH OF HOPE

*“Hope, that is what keeps us going”* Joanna, participant. (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 10).

It is a beautiful afternoon in late July when my husband and I drive north on the interstate road in search of Hope<sup>1</sup>. Shades of peaceful green trees sharply contrast with the heavy traffic on the interstate as an obstinate fireball stares at us from the midst of an intense blue sky. Not a bird flies on the horizon while the steamy asphalt trembles and roars.

Twenty minutes later, we turn onto an adjacent road as we follow directions to the place that is to bring so many challenges and delights to my professional and personal life. This state road is a vein connecting a series of picturesque small towns in this southeastern U.S. region.

As we pull into the first gas station, across from a roadside flea market, familiar scenes and sounds introduce me to the community that lives nearby. A crowd of old and new cars of many makes and models, filled with people patiently waiting, lines the pumps.

While my husband fills the tank, I walk into the gas station to pay our check. A slim, five-foot-tall man shows the clerk a bottle of water and a pack of crackers, and points his index finger to the outside pumps, raising five of his fingers. “Number five?” the clerk politely asks. The man does not respond. “Numerou cincou!” says the clerk, as he takes my payment, proud of his heavily accented effort. With a sigh of relief, the small man nods, pointing at the bottle of water and the pack of crackers that he lays on the counter.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Outside in the parking lot, more familiar sounds: “*Aquí tienes el agua para el niño.*” [“Here is the water for the boy”] I feel suffused with pride mixed with choking, struggling tears, the memory of the store transaction compounded by hearing my native language from the lips of these people whose brown hands and faces both reveal and hide. My mind pictures them working under the sun, doing jobs that take most of their physical energy. I cannot discern their nationality, but there is a special thing about Hispanics:<sup>2</sup> we look so much alike and feel so similarly about our countries, our people, our families, our jobs (Gurr, 1999). These apparent similarities hide sharp contrasts between what Garrett calls “the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ those who have legal papers and those who don’t” (2000, p. 5). Such differences also encompass educational attainment ranging from illiteracy to higher education, and diversity in religious practices and beliefs. Even though most immigrants from Mexico and Central and South American countries share Spanish as a base language, some come from places where people speak indigenous languages such as Otomani and Quechua (Ramos, 2001).

Sharing a common language provides a basis for mutual understanding, yet it also provides room for misconstruction, as some words are used differently in different countries. “Even concepts of time are different. For Mexicans the word *ahorita* means a time period that encompasses now and the next couple of hours. For Colombians *ahorita* means in five minutes” (Rodriguez, 2002, p. E1).

“The issues are what keep us connected, not the country of origin,” said Luz Borrero (editor and reporter for Hispanic newspaper “La Prensa”), “The issues are really the driving

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Hispanic” is one of many terms used to refer to immigrants coming from countries in South and Central America whose official language is Spanish. It is also the term used by the participants in this study to refer to themselves; therefore, I will use it throughout this paper to reflect their preference.

force: the lack of access to education, the lack of access to health care. Lack of access matters if you are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Nicaraguan, or Ecuadorean [sic]" (Rodriguez 2002, p. E3). Nevertheless, such issues do not forestall immigrants from seeking better opportunities "up north" (Ramos, 2001).

"They are coming here today to spend their Sunday," I theorize to my husband. Flea markets are social places where Hispanics gather to trade, to find support, and to balance their often meager budgets by purchasing low-cost articles (Gurr, 1999). In this flea market they find translation services, agencies that will wire money to their families at home, used clothes, toys, opportunities to socialize and -especially- Hispanic music.

I jump in the car and our search continues. After five miles, we turn at a bifurcation that leads us through a dream town with a historical flavor. Small southern towns with their toy-sized post offices and "city-hall/libraries" evoke memories of fairy tales, stories read at Christmas in a family-crowded living room while the children indulged themselves on homemade candy. When you have lived in a place for your whole life, it is difficult to appreciate the beauty that surrounds you. Only the foreigner can really delight in what is different and give thanks for the opportunity to experience such differences.

My mother is fond of homes in the southern United States because they are built high from the ground and have so many flowers around, especially those with wrap-around porches. Upon my arrival in the United States more than ten years ago, I was mesmerized by the roomy yards that separate neighborhood homes. Having my own yard space after thirty-two years of sharing three of the walls of my home with our Colombian neighbors is a privilege that I still cherish.

A few miles farther a chicken plant appears, the first sign of the forces that brought Hispanics to the area. At the sight of its empty parking lot, I remember the first and only line job I held in the U.S. seven years ago when I divorced my first husband. Scared, insecure, and with no family, I had difficulty finding a job despite my legal status and educational level, holding as I do two bachelor's degrees from Nariño University and Marian University, and a master's degree from San Buenaventura University (all in Colombia, South America). After numerous applications and a few interviews, a clothing company hired me to work as a language broker and liaison with Central American contractors. When I was not doing translation, I was emptying crates, counting and packing supplies to ship to the contractors. For months, the owners had searched for a bilingual worker and could not find anyone qualified for the job; still I was paid only minimum wage.

Political and economic agendas have sparked an interest in the living and working conditions of Hispanics in the United States. While many scholars, employers, and government officials acknowledge the role Hispanics increasingly play in the southeastern economy, they also point to the absence of support for and conflicting policies regarding illegal immigrants (Gurr, 1999; Glanton, 1999; Ramos, 2001; Stroer, 1999). Frightened and unaware of labor laws that protect them from predatory employers, some immigrants work in unsafe conditions and are paid sub-minimum wages while others are cheated out of their wages (Deposada, 2002). In the words of Atlanta's Mundo Hispanico newspaper editor Pilar Verdés, employers take advantage of the immigrants' lack of knowledge of the system and of English. "They're like slaves. They have no rights. Everybody takes advantage of them" (Roedemeier, 2000, p. 3D).

Several studies and publications address the rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States (Bixler, 1999, 2000; Garrett, 2000; Glanton, 1999; Rodriguez, 2002). Some claim, however, that no place has experienced growth such as the southeast:

The dramatic transition to a multi-racial society has surprised, frustrated, and angered some native-born Southerners, reluctant to accept change and fearful of the unknown stranger . . . . The South is beginning to look and feel and sound like the rest of the country but the change is not easy. (Garrett 2000, p.6)

Thus, Hispanics face special economic, cultural, and political difficulties in the Southeast. Such trials are often rooted in years of tradition and culture:

As Hispanics grow into the country's largest minority group in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, their greatest political challenge may come in the South, a region that endured a civil war and often violent civil rights movement in a futile effort to preserve a culture that excluded non-whites. (Glanton, 1999 pg. 1A)

From the nineteen sixties to date there has been a shift in the numbers and roles of Hispanics in the United States, from laborers and household aides to consumers, producers, role models, and citizens with increasing political clout. Hispanics migrate in search of work in order to change the living conditions they experienced in their countries of origin (Gurr, 1999). Forced to migrate by violence, extreme poverty, or both, in their native countries (Garrett, 2000, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000), most immigrants continue to be pawns in the game of supporting the economies on both sides of the border.<sup>3</sup> Although their contributions to the

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<sup>3</sup> Garrett cited a broadcast by the National Public Radio, March 28, 2000, as estimating that "\$8 billion per year is sent to Mexico alone" (2000, p. 7). Equally, Glanton (1999) pointed out that "Georgia has the 17th-largest Hispanic consumer market in the country, with an estimated buying power of \$3.7 billion" (p. 5A; see also Bixler, 1999). Haynes (1999) reported on challenges to social services providers in southwestern rural areas, stating that the

economies of both sides of the border range in the billions (Ferris, 2000; Soto, 1999), no health care or insurance is available, except for (mandated) child health care. Forced to work jobs that nobody wants, the immigrants see their right to decent pay and humane working conditions stripped away (Garrett 2000).

Hispanics migrate to any place where they can find a job (Gurr, 1999). With its poultry, agriculture, and construction industries, the southeast has been attracting immigrants from several countries and even other regions of the United States (Garrett 2000, p. 13, 15; Glanton, 1999). Mostly a young group with an average age of 26.4 years (Wooten, 1999), Hispanics also experience a high rate of population growth (Ramos, 2001; Stroer, 1999, 2000; Tanner, 2002).

Three more miles into our journey, mobile homes begin to dot the hills, as railroad tracks, sand and gravel line the road. Trucks of various sizes park along the tracks. Tall pine trees struggle to filter the air in a doomed race with the white spirals that spew from the chimney at the quarry. Soon an open gate invites us in. We have found Hope.

We drive around the empty parking lot, assessing the structure and setting of the building and its surrounding area. “This building is about 30 years old,” says my husband, drawing from an expertise acquired during his early apprenticeship in the building business. “I like this place,” I comment as I look at the colorful slides, swings, and tubs on the playground.

The next day I interview for a teaching job in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). There I learn that both the principal and the instructional coordinator are also new to

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counties have to cover expenses related to rescue, hospitalization, incarceration, and even burial for illegal immigrants because the federal government has made them accountable for providing those services, yet the Immigration and Naturalization Service doesn't help them pay the tab.

the school, although none of us is new to our profession.<sup>4</sup> We share plans of hope for the upcoming year when I agree to take the job teaching English language learners.

The job interview develops into a conversation, and we talk about our teaching philosophies. The three of us strongly believe that all children can learn, regardless of health, language, or race. All of us enjoy working with small children, and we share anecdotes of our previous jobs in schools.

I express my beliefs about working with the parents of my students and my dreams to increase the academic achievement of the children. One of my interviewers reveals that, at a staff-training workshop, administrators of local schools discussed the factors influencing academic achievement. Low socio-economic status, limited schooling of the parents, and single-parent family composition were cited at that workshop as strong predictors for low achievement by the children. Regardless of such predictions we affirm our commitment to work together in order to facilitate a better learning environment for the children and to improve the current standing of the school, which was listed by the state as being in need of improvement. Our alliance makes me feel that there is hope for the children, those children we had yet to meet, but whom we commit to help. There is hope that we will work together, the administrators, the families, and I, to enhance the learning experiences of the children. That hope plays in my decision to stay and make this school my work place for the next three years. It is also the reason I use the new name that we tacitly coined at the job interview to refer to the school in this study: Hope Elementary School.

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of this writing, the principal has retired and the assistant principal has taught and been an administrator over twenty-five years.



## *The Praxis of Learning*

*Praxis*—“...reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Paulo Freire, 1982, p. 36).

When I came to the United States, I gave up family, culture and friends, as well as my teaching profession. After five years in this country, I regained my license to teach. Teaching and learning are integral in my life; they are vital components of my identity.

I learned how to learn (and how to teach) early in my life, at the hands of my parents. Both played important roles in facilitating opportunities to practice and reflect, to problem-solve, and to appropriate and generate new knowledge at every available opportunity, taking advantage of teachable moments, gently helping me learn from my experiences as I grew up.

At home, we celebrated school as the children’s job. We learned that every day brings opportunities for learning, and that homework was enjoyable, not a burden or just “busy work.” As we entertained daily conversations about new knowledge, we engaged in a game of school in which parents and children alternated in our roles of teacher and learner.

“What would you like to be when you grow up?” asked my father one day. “I have not decided between being a teacher or a researcher,” I replied. Dad smiled as he said, “Why not both?” I didn’t quite understand how could I merge both aspirations. I was but eight years old.

Dad continued to facilitate dialogues, asking questions and showing interest in the events in my life. I sensed his passion for learning and his belief in providing everyone with opportunities to learn. I realize now that he was fostering my dreams, mentoring me into the worlds of teaching, researching and parenting.

In a six-year study in British Columbia, Peter Coleman (1998) examined the interactions of parents, students and teachers (what he termed a *triad*) and their effects on academic

achievement. Triad exchanges, he argued, impact “the students’ willingness and readiness to learn; predict student satisfaction and commitment to school and schooling; and hence largely shape both the attitudes towards school and learning, and the level of achievement of the child” (p. 1).

Coleman maintained that involved parents affect several spheres in the lives of their children, both academic and nonacademic. Communication with parents is a basic component of achievement, he argued, because when parents entertain regular conversation about schooling with their children, “this communication predicts (a) sense of personal efficacy (self-confidence as a learner) with respect to schooling, and student valuing of school and schooling” (p. 4-5).

Parenting and teaching are, in a sense, professions with fuzzy job descriptions that require quick thinking and on-the-spot adjustments. My father understood educators and parents as researchers, visionaries, and supporters of the child. With him, I learned that education is guidance and as such, it requires ample knowledge of the child, of his or her interests, motivations and abilities. In order to learn about a child, a parent must be a good observer and a critical thinker, seizing on opportunities to foster values and expectations about the outcomes and process of learning. As visionaries, parents and teachers assess the interests and skills of children to help them pursue their goals, to refine the individual searches that start early in their lives. My father’s goal was to enable his children to be happy by understanding our worth as human beings, capable of helping others, capable of contributing to our communities. Consequently, he helped each of us discover a calling and, as a result, seven different—and at times, opposing—personalities evolved as we became professionals in areas ranging from law to health, computer science, and education.

My parents entertained regular conversations with our teachers, sharing their observations about our learning and personalities. I cherish my memories of my second-grade teacher coming over for Sunday breakfast as my mother demonstrated her culinary abilities. Our parents encouraged us to participate in sports and became our biggest and most faithful fans. The school's basketball team became part of the family, and my parents found in our coach an ally in their efforts to supervise our academic work while fostering sportsmanship and teamwork.

As I grew into adulthood, the role of my parents changed from encouraging to mentoring, patiently listening to me as I struggled to make sense of my world. Our conversations centered on my teaching and learning experiences.

Then Dad became sick. We knew a cancer was violently taking his life away, and as I struggled to cope with my pain, he asked me to read him the Bible every day. He listened attentively as I read his favorite books, Proverbs and Psalms. The soothing words of his favorite Psalm, number 23, carried me through this difficult period in my life with faith and hope. The conversations that followed every biblical reading illuminated my understanding of God's legacy and the new responsibility vested upon me, to continue the job my father started, to continue to encourage and facilitate other people's learning.

"Hug me, my daughter," he pleaded one early December morning. Fighting back my tears, I put my arm around his shoulders, as he choked out his regrets at not having much to leave his children upon his death. "I am just leaving you this old house," he said. "You are leaving us our education, what we are. Our house can be here tomorrow, or destroyed in a few seconds, but your legacy—love, faith, moral values, and education—will remain with us forever. We can offer that to others, and contribute to make a better world," I replied. "Thank you, my daughter," was his soft reply.

Dad continued to share the experiences of his impending death: “I can see my deceased mother. She is calling me,” he said one evening, indicating the possibility of life beyond life. And just as he guided me through life, with his strong hands holding mine, I held his hands through his last breath, encouraging him not to be scared, reassuring him in his final journey, as I whispered my last words to him, “*Descansa en paz, Papito*” [“May you rest in peace, Daddy.”] I then learned that love follows us through life, that it takes pleasure in seeing our loved ones learn and grow, and that it keeps us close at death, building from the memories of the experiences we shared.

The conversations I entertained with my father helped me refocus on my early experiences as a child, when both my parents exercised more control over my life, control that they progressively released as I grew into adulthood. My father and I discussed the changing role of parenting and the foundations underlying his efforts to help each of his children acquire an education, both academic and practical. We both came to understand the main objective of life to be that of pursuing happiness and sharing opportunities of happiness with others. We understood excellence to mean sharing and helping others achieve good living conditions. As we talked about my profession and my daily experiences in life, I came to understand *how* I learned and how I could support the learning of others around me. I also learned the important role of the family in a child’s motivation and opportunities to learn, to envision a future.

### *Learning Methods and Community Building*

A few years after the death of my father, I faced new challenges in my second culture. Being a teacher in a public school in the southeastern U.S.A. tested my commitment to teaching and called into question my knowledge of the rules by which people play the game of schooling

in this region. As I realized that many Hispanic families were, like myself, facing similar difficulties, I decided to stay and learn with them.

As a staff member of a public elementary school, I am part of what I call the “home/school team” responsible for the education of the children I teach. Because action research seeks to understand and find ways to solve problems and to provide the researchers with information to change their own practice, it follows that, at the personal level, my primary interest has been to understand family/school interactions to improve my teaching practice. As a participatory action researcher, however, my goal is more ambitious for I expect that team processes will steer deeper reflection and lead to action to improve both our beliefs about and our practices as parents and teachers.

During my last year at Hope Elementary, I taught ESOL to an average of thirty-seven third-grade students, some of whom I served for two to three class periods a day, for an average of fifty-four children a day. ESOL population fluctuates, as many transient families move frequently within the district as well as within states and between countries. In a meeting with Hope Elementary’s assistant principal, Mrs. Thomas, she stated that three years earlier, the percentage of transient students were around 79%; thirty days before the academic year ended, the percentages went down to 49% (field notes). Assigning one ESOL teacher to every grade level was a tactical move that allowed for the configuration of teams in which grade-level teachers, administrators, and ESOL teachers exchanged ideas and shared concerns about the students during protected planning times throughout the school year.

Early in the year, I sent welcome letters in Spanish to parents of my third grade ESOL students, announcing that the school had assigned me to work with the students. In the letter, I presented the families with an outline of the program, academic goals, and expectations for the

children. I also provided them with the school and my home phone number, as well as a schedule for them to call or visit me at the school. Only two parents visited and talked with me about their children.

My pilot study indicated that, for the parents whom I interviewed, group meetings become learning opportunities, especially for those who are too timid to ask questions and share concerns with others. Therefore, I invited the parents of my students to attend a group meeting to be conducted in Spanish, providing them with three possible sessions to attend: Thursday night, Saturday morning, or Monday morning during a teacher workday (student holiday).

Although all parents returned a confirmation slip, only sixty-five percent (24 parents) attended the meetings, and I made it a point to call the parents who did not attend in order to introduce myself and to establish an initial contact with them. At this time, I was working toward my teaching goal of reaching all parents while attempting to build community among them. A sense of community could enhance the families' network and provide opportunities for learning from and with others, as well as for emotional support while sharing their common experiences. Twenty-four percent (9 parents) reported that they could not attend any of the meetings because their employers would not give them permission to leave work, as they worked Monday through Saturday. We agreed that we would call each other on the phone to discuss the progress and needs of their children. Eleven percent (4 parents) said that they forgot about the meeting and asked me to call the day before our next meeting to remind them to attend it.

The parent group met once a month from October through January. An average of seventeen parents attended, and the group decided to meet twice a month during the period of February through April. In the meeting following the university's approval of my research proposal, we discussed the goals for the research, read over the consent form, and filled out a

large part of an initial anonymous survey. The parents took the survey home for completion, but only a few returned it. I reminded the parents that they were free to participate or not, and that participation in the research was not a requirement of attendance at the meetings (see appendixes B and C). Twenty-three parents agreed to the use of data collected on their children and themselves for this study. Of them, thirteen answered and returned the survey, and six agreed to an interview.

In brief, the data for this research was collected in three periods of time. From 1996-2000, while working as a teacher in American public schools, I wrote journal entries about my experiences working with Hispanic parents and children, comparing those experiences with those of my earlier life as a learner, daughter, and teacher in Colombia, South America. During the summer of 2000 and the spring of 2001, I conducted a pilot study, interviewing parents and teachers in Colombia and Mexico. The third stage took place in the academic year of 2000/2001, when the parents and I engaged in dialogues, meetings, and interviews about our experiences as we struggled to facilitate learning for the children at Hope Elementary School.

#### *Ethical and Methodological Difficulties throughout the Journey*

Like June Price (1996), who wrote about emotional and ethical concerns in doing research, I was forthright in discussing with my co-investigators potential risks for disclosing information that I was under a mandate to report, namely, child neglect and abuse. I also underscored their right to privacy as related to their legal status in the country, expressing my preference for not discussing any information about that topic. I felt as Price did, that sharing such information could compromise the analysis; however, I diverged from her in her refusal to build close relationships with participants. Bar-On believes that the interactions that result while interviewing can be equated to “therapeutic interventions in which the clinician and patient

function under a set of rules securing the role of the former and the privacy of the latter without the clear boundaries or a contract that a clinical intervention contains as a given” (1996, p. 9). As a participatory action researcher who was also a co-investigator with the group, I find Bar-On’s perspective is indispensable to foster dialogues conducive to critical analysis of everyday lives. For I equally contributed my experiences and facilitated access to community-building, reading, writing and reflecting, in dialogic exchanges that took place twice a month for over six months on Saturday afternoons.

For some co-investigators, attending the meetings was their only opportunity to get out of the house to meet friends, while others wanted someone to listen and guide them during their navigation of the (American) system. In this process of making sense of our lives, they sought out a friend as well as an equal partner in the task of educating the children. During this strenuous period of data collection, reflection, and transformation, I heavily relied on the school counselor for guidance, support and advice. Thus, I wore the several hats of researcher, teacher, and friend as I recorded my research data.

As I continue to work with parents and children in my new school, the search goes on, testing what I have learned, putting theory into practice with other parents while still sustaining conversations, and plans for writing for Hispanic audiences, with co-researchers in the writing group. An important component of this new learning is asking new questions with new groups of parents, replicating some of the activities in which we engaged in the original research, and encouraging these new groups to become critical researchers of their own lives and those of their children.



## *Learning the Game*

Acknowledging that my difficulties with teaching in America are due to linguistic and pragmatic differences, as well as to hidden rules in American society and school, I realized that in order to be an effective teacher I must learn about those rules and differences as well as about how my students learn, what they bring to the task of schooling. Therefore, just as my own parents helped my teachers gain a better perspective of me, I must reach out to parents to learn from and with them, to extend our mutual practices to enhance learning opportunities for the children.

Educating children is a concern and responsibility of families, schools, and societies together. Teaching and learning are intertwined; they are at the same time dialectical (one does not exist without the other) without being binary (one does not exclude the other), intentional, and purposeful. They are historically situated in specific societies and obey to the demands history imposes on society. However, they can be—and often are—controlled to serve specific purposes and political agendas, although it is also possible to put both teaching and learning at the service of creating just societies and better living conditions for all.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1984) theorized that education could be characterized either as the transmission of knowledge (*banking education*) or as a process of liberation (*critical and dialogic, or problem-posing education*). Banking education, he claimed, focuses on transmission of knowledge by means of deposits and withdrawals, where learners are required to ‘receive’ knowledge, memorize and regurgitate it in an a critical manner. Critical, dialogic education encourages the learner to examine concrete situations, connect them to the socio-cultural and political frameworks in which they happen, reflect on and act to transform those situations with an aim of improving the living conditions of all.

Because of the varied and even conflicting purposes education can serve, it is important to examine how it takes place in a society, what forces affect the process of learning, and what goals are sought through such a process. Particularly important for this study is to examine the forces affecting the learning of Hispanics in American public schools and whether parental involvement enhances learning opportunities for this population, and if so, just how it does so.

Often Hispanics occupy the spotlight in the news, with reports that address social, political, and economic concerns. Yet, this population is largely misunderstood, as we slowly struggle to acquire our own niche, to exercise a right to a voice and to humane living conditions in the U.S.A. One of the main yet often ignored difficulties that Hispanics face is gaining an education in and about their second culture, and learning to exercise their political options within it, which is not to be confounded with learning the language of their new country. This study is concerned with the pragmatics of surviving, interacting with, and learning in the Anglo culture, and concretely, in the culture of the public schools.

Acknowledging that education and learning evolve around specific goals, that they both rely on strategies to achieve such goals, and that both processes are the product of human interactions (i.e., teachers and learners in interchangeable roles), we can profitably use game theory (Binmore, 1993; Bourdieu, 1990; McCain, 1999) to examine them. A game is “a procedure or strategy for gaining an end” (Webster Collegiate Dictionary, p. 471). It is also a metaphor to study human behavior and relationships: “... “games” have been a scientific metaphor for a much wider range of human interactions in which the outcomes depend on the interactive strategies of two or more persons, who have opposed or at best mixed motives” (McCain, 1999, p. 3). In a game, two or more people interact and apply strategies to achieve a

goal, which at times is a common goal (cooperative games), while at others, it is an individual goal (non-cooperative games). Game theorists call that goal or outcome a *payoff* (Bartos, 1967). The uses of game theory in connection with sociological phenomena differ in interpretation and purpose. Bartos, for instance, claimed that, “Instead of attempting to describe how men [sic] actually behave or to predict how they will behave, the theory of games is used chiefly to determine how men should behave” (Bartos, 1967, p. 149). Bourdieu (1990), on the other hand, contended that game theory illuminates the rules and regularities in personal interactions: “You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities*” (p. 66). In this study I employ game theory in a Bourdieuan fashion, to understand how Hispanic parents in American schools play the game of family involvement. I will also attempt to uncover the relationship between praxis (Freire, 1982) and learning how to play the game, as well as the ways in which knowing how to play the game of parent involvement affects the participation of Hispanic parents in the education of their children in American schools.

### *In Search of Mutual Learning Experiences*

Learning is central to survival, and human beings go through life learning from multiple sources. A core belief undergirding this research is that true learning means critical learning, questioning and problem-solving. Education flourishes when people interact to purposefully share knowledge and experiences in order to effect changes in each other’s lives. This study focuses on education as critical learning as opposed to a banking education model that depends on deposits and withdrawals to transmit knowledge (Freire, 1982).

An educator of adult peasants in Brazil, Freire contended that education should be a process of liberation, enabling those who have been dispossessed of their fundamental human rights to achieve adequate living conditions and to learn to exercise their social and political rights. Freire's vision of education as liberating action-reflection-action goes hand in hand with participatory action research (PAR), a theory of methodology with roots in the Frankfurt school, the U.S.A, and several Latin American countries such as Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia. Freire stated that in PAR processes there is not a single method but rather multiple methods that evolve from every research situation (Freire & Faundez, 1989).

In PAR processes, methods are developed by a group of co-investigators (Freire, 1984, p. 68, 97). Their method evolves from dialogues, as the participants in a research group examine their daily practices to uncover contradictions and myths in order to change the situations and practices that objectify and keep them from exercising their full humanity (Freire, 1982; Fals Borda, 2001).

Participatory action research seeks dialogic opportunities with the dispossessed, those who are at the margin of society by virtue of economic or political inequalities and/or linguistic and cultural differences. The focus of this type of research is on generating *praxis* (Freire, 1982), or the relationship between theory and practice that facilitates *conscientização* (Freire, 1974). *Conscientização*, or conscientization, is the awareness of political options and the action that evolves from such awareness:

We understand conscientization as a participation experience. Yet, as participation means *to take part in the process of generating decisions and*

*actions*, is not limited to the domain of consciousness. It has political, social, and economic connotations. (De Schutter, 1986, p. 56. Translated from Spanish)<sup>5</sup>

In this type of research, all participants become co-investigators because they engage in joint critical examination of specific events, generate their own theories and test them against other theories and their daily practices (Freire 1982, p. 92-101). Because of such group processes, the pronoun “I” is replaced by the pronoun “we,” and the “teacher” or “researcher” becomes another co-investigator, but one who has the additional responsibility of animating the group, facilitating dialogue and encouraging community-building (Beckwith, 1997; Stoecker, 1997). Her or his ultimate goal is to encourage the group to take ownership of their joint searches for options to improve their daily lives. Throughout the following chapters, I will describe my changing roles in this research as well as some of the processes that took place as a group of parents of third-grade ESOL students and I attempted to play the game of parental involvement at Hope Elementary School.

In examining family-school interactions at Hope Elementary I will draw on Bourdieu’s game theory (1990) to describe their rules and regularities. Freire (1984) stated that people interact within thematic universes congruent with their living conditions. An initial stage in understanding such universes is that of decoding, or focusing on reality, what Fals Borda (2001) termed *what is*; a reality that, both authors have claimed, subjugated people do not easily see. *What it ought to be* is believed to be the exclusive binary alternative to people’s perceived reality, and, both authors argued, can be achieved through educational (critical) intervention. Drawing from several theories of parental involvement, I will analyze the actual practices that took place as observed and discussed by the players at Hope Elementary and their level of correspondence to the players’ perceived (ideal) practices. From such perceptions of self and of

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Spanish to English are mine.

the practices of self and the other, I will theorize on the disparity between what lies ahead for the school and parents, and *what ought to be*, according to the theories produced with the co-investigators during our interactions.

To understand parental involvement at Hope Elementary, I integrate Vincent's (1996) theory of parental involvement as participation; Delgado-Gaitán's (1990, 1991) theory of parental empowerment; and Epstein's (2001) and Swapp's (1993) proposals for home/school partnerships. In chapter two, I will appraise Valdés (1996, 2001) hesitation at fostering parental involvement of Hispanics, as well as her well-documented studies about this group's learning (and not learning) in American public schools. In brief, this study is an attempt at critical inquiry from a collaborative, dialogical paradigm (participatory action research) illuminated by Freirean (critical) theory.

#### *A Woman in the Middle*

A few weeks after my job interview, I received a reminder for pre-planning. In the midst of my excitement about a new school, memories of my previous years teaching in America emerged, memories of misunderstandings, of hidden messages and rules that reveal so much about the cultural milieu of this southeastern area of the U.S.A. Yet Gurr reported that

Despite the language barrier, the working-class Hispanics who have flocked to Georgia in droves in recent years would appear to have much in common with their neighbors of the Bible-belt Deep South. By most accounts, they have strong work ethics. A majority-Catholic community, many are religious. And above all, the family is treasured. (1999, p. 1B)

In spite of those "similarities," however, it is easy for Hispanics who are learning about the cultural setup of the South to miss hidden messages and cultural rules as can be evidenced

from my own experience. Here in the South, the golden rule is firmly connected with a second edict: “If you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say anything.” I had trouble understanding this rule, as in my native country privately telling someone that something is wrong is a sign of friendship and honesty that can shield the person from future embarrassment. Here, in my new home, concerns about being perceived as someone who hurts people’s feelings are the rule, and people master the art of subtlety, of suggestion.

To facilitate home/school communications some schools in the county to which Hope Elementary belongs are resorting to a newly created position, that of a parent liaison, while others rely on their bilingual staff to fulfill such duties. For the past seven years, as a bilingual teacher, I have been a liaison between the school and the home, as well as an advocate for the children and their families. Such roles have provided me with unique opportunities to witness (and experience) the slow progression toward tolerance so many times numbed by fear or enabled through communication, understanding, and empathy. In an effort to enhance awareness among my fellow teachers and college students, I have publicly—and loudly—shared my shortcomings dealing with the American language and southeastern culture, at the risk of ridicule and misunderstanding about my abilities. Throughout my brief scholarly career as a student and teacher in the United States, I have also heard many concerns and myths about Hispanics expressed by Anglo-Americans.

Entries from several journals<sup>6</sup> that I have written throughout my years teaching in the U.S.A. reveal practices and discourses about Hispanics expressed in various settings, such as

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<sup>6</sup> To minimize the possibility of identification of the people involved in these interactions, names are changed. I will not disclose in this chapter the specific dates of these entries; however, the vignettes were collected throughout six years of teaching in U.S.A.

local classrooms, as well as formal and informal meetings. These journal entries document beliefs equating second language proficiency with intelligence, myths about the draining effect that Hispanics have on social services, as well as a fear of the unfamiliar that paralyzes and blinds.

I helped Ruth's father today. The family received several letters from the school nutrition office requesting a check stub and the parents' social security numbers to verify eligibility. The cafeteria employee stated the parents needed to fill out a new form and write zeros for every digit in the mother's social security number, as she doesn't have one neither does she work. Because there were no clean forms available, I asked to make a photocopy of the form she showed us so that I could white out the answers to make a new request, a practice that is common in these situations. She refused, claiming that it was "a government form" and any copying would be inadmissible. I pointed out that the form was a translation I have made into Spanish, but she still refused to let me use it. Because the parent was missing work to take care of this problem, I found a copy that I helped him fill out and presented to the cafeteria employee. She commented, "What makes me mad is that these parents do not own a house in the county. They don't pay taxes, so their children shouldn't benefit from school services." (Journal entry)

Such stereotypes rest on a lack of knowledge of the real situation of Hispanics in the area. Soto (1999) shows that a significant number of Hispanic families in this area own a home, and that the trend increases every year: "Fannie Mae, the privately owned but congressionally chartered mortgage buyer, expects a 45 percent jump in [Hispanic] immigrant homeowners by 2010. That could mean a total 6.8 million people" (p. E4). Aside from home ownership,



families who rent a home contribute taxes to the school in an indirect way, through taxes paid by their landlords and through sales and income taxes. Ramos (2001) reports that the Hispanic contribution to the national economy numbers in the billions of dollars and that their use of social services is much lower than what they contribute to each state and the nation (See also Garrett, 2000). Nevertheless, the media often points out individual and isolated cases of costly illegal immigrants using health care services along border states, due to accidents in their attempts to cross the border (Haynes, 1999; Malone, 2002; Ramos, 2001).

Certain discourses reveal frustration, often manifested in oppressive practices toward children and families in our public schools. During an informal conversation with some teachers about the learning difficulties of a child, I expressed my disappointment in trying to work with the parents. "I have tried to talk with them on the phone and through home visits, even gave them my home number so that they can call me at their convenience, yet I have had no response. The child is in dire need of help and physical care," I pointed out. One of the teachers retorted, "Well, this is the way I feel about it: If the parents don't care, why should I bust my butt for this child?" (Field notes).

The road to tolerance is long and tortuous, taking more than good faith efforts from concerned citizens to provide opportunities for cross-cultural understanding. Several months after returning from Mexico, for example, a participant in a teacher exchange program aimed at raising cultural awareness among teachers about Mexican children in American schools, stated,

These Mexican families are not interested in education or in bettering themselves, or in creating new [educational] opportunities for their children. If there were jobs in Mexico, they would never come here. All they want to do here is to make

money to send back to Mexico, and if they had someone to baby-sit their children in Mexico, they would leave them back there (Field notes).

Yet, in the midst of this gloomy landscape, I also found numerous examples of empathy, of willingness to stand up for a child.

At the end of the meeting, the parent said, “*Yo les agradezco a las maestras que se preocupen por miya, que se hayan reunido para hablar sobre ella y que estén dedicando tiempo para que ella aprenda.*” [I thank the teachers for worrying about my daughter, for meeting to talk about her, and for devoting time (to make sure that) she learns.] The teachers’ faces beamed with a mixture of pride, humility, and thankfulness for this parent’s recognition and acknowledgment of them. I could tell it meant a lot to them to hear the words as I translated. The homeroom teacher, who understands some Spanish, was especially touched. When the parent left, she broke down and began to cry. Finally, after she composed herself, she said between sobs that the family appeared to be struggling to make ends meet. “She gave me a Christmas present and yet, she didn’t have all the money for the field trip. She gave me \$1.50 and told me it was all she had, that they would try to send the rest of the money later on. I feel bad, because I have so much and these people have so little” (Field notes).

Experiences such as these as well as my awareness of my own bias as a Hispanic woman will play a role in the selection of data and the analysis that I will present in this dissertation. My own experiences in my first and second cultures couple with my teaching ethics dictating advocacy for the child and his or her family; thus, I am not and cannot be an “honest (impartial) broker” (Bar-On, 1999, p. 10). I am a juggler walking on the tight rope as I make efforts to be

true to my teaching profession and my ethical role as a researcher, to my philosophical beliefs and the new standards dictated by my second culture, and to maintain both my loyalty to the school and my commitment to the children and their families. Always in the middle, I am in a position that in theory provides a panoramic view of the interactions that I witness, but in practice allows me to jump to either side as needed to play the game of facilitating communication and understanding.

Teaching in Colombia, my native country, was a rewarding challenge that I took on with the guidance of my father. Teaching in America is also a challenge, and I took it on without a mentor, with only the passion for my profession that I hold in my heart. I am attempting to understand the rules of the game of parental involvement in Hope Elementary. More than understanding, I feel that I have been striving to get into the game, perhaps even to get a new game started. I began that struggle the night of my first open-house at Hope Elementary, when antagonism towards Hispanics became evident through attempts by some members of the community to silence our language under claims that English should be *the language* used for all communications, official and unofficial.

I played by the rules and terms suggested by the administrators at Hope, posting all communications both in English and Spanish. Asserting the rights of the Hispanic community meant that all communications with parents had to be attempted in their native language, as stated by federal legal mandate, in spite of the objections to the use of Spanish (Faltis, 1997, p. 43). It also meant that Hispanic parents should be allowed and encouraged to gain their own spaces in the school: that they should be valued and respected, welcomed and acknowledged.

I continue the fight to assert and protect the rights of the Hispanic community in my daily interactions in the school and the community, walking on a thin line because I am and I am not.

I cannot escape that. I am a teacher who does not belong to the mainstream group, an exploratory (ESOL) teacher, not a homeroom teacher. I am a teacher who knows the other culture and the other game of the school, one who views education from a different, perhaps even more idealistic, perspective.

I am a staff member who speaks a different language, even in my attempts to communicate in English, a second language with an accent, a language with a passion, forever marked with ideological perspectives, continuously reborn, shaped through countless interactions. I speak a classroom English that I have attempted to perfect in my adult world while immersed in rural Georgia and in the academic life of a university.

I am also an English-as-a-second-language learner and a teacher of English as a second language, struggling for my right to my own words, my own ideas, my own ideals. I am the staff member who sometimes fails to immediately recognize rhetorical patterns, subtleties in the speech of others, nonverbal communication, hidden messages. A staff member, nevertheless, who attempts to recognize practices that marginalize and oppress, who believes in the value of sharing and learning from others and with others and who believes that in these processes all participants should benefit and be acknowledged co-makers of such knowledge. A person who is convinced that change is a political option, the product of personal choice, and that choice is only possible when it is informed and conscious, the product of learning, opportunities and awareness.

I am also a *Latina* and I am not. I am a mixture of cultures, of races, of beliefs: one who is not attempting to speak for anyone yet, at the same time, is fighting for ideals and opportunities for myself and for others like me. I am not a parent, and yet in certain ways, I am. I am a teacher and a learner. I share a language, and borrow languages. I am both, group and

individual. An individual who struggles to be accepted and acknowledged as a member by the group. I am contradiction, an immanent and *pragmatic contradiction* (Derrida 1996, p. 3).

The fact that I am still learning the rules of southeastern U.S. society dictates that I be careful and tactful yet true to my co-investigators and the research. One of the biggest dilemmas I confront in this research is the choice of what to present and what to withhold, for I understand the need for honest disclosure in order to facilitate praxis for both parents and the school, but U.S. culture seems to dictate a need for subtlety and tact. The players (co-researchers and staff) viewed their interactions in different, often opposite, ways, yet through documenting our analysis as it occurred at our group and face-validity<sup>7</sup> meetings (Lather, 1986), I hoped to present them with opportunities to assess how other players perceived them and how they played the game.

The narrative style of this dissertation focuses on some case histories that constitute powerful examples of important topics in parental involvement of Hispanic families at Hope Elementary. For methodological purposes, for example, the group of co-researchers developed an integrated chapter in which experiences shared by most of them were written under the name of Zunilda, a fictitious name given to one of the co-researchers in the group, for it was her initial disclosure of her memories that initiated a dialogue that uncovered an important shared myth, that of a “better life up-north.”

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<sup>7</sup> One of the arguments against qualitative research is that of its lack of “validity.” Face validity, presenting the information to the informant or co-researcher and discussing the interpretation of it by the researcher, seeks opportunities for dialogue between them in order to verify the accuracy of the data and to enhance the understanding of its relevance and interpretation. In Lather’s (1980) words, it is about “recycling back (data, categories, and conclusions) through respondents” (p. 70. See also Delgado-Gaitán, 1990; Stoecker, 1997).

### *Between Hope and Despair*

I was prepared to encounter resistance from the staff on the first day of pre-planning, as my five-year experience as a teacher in American public schools has demonstrated that it is hard for many American educators to trust a fellow teacher with an accent to teach ESOL. Yet it is more than my accent that sets me apart: it is my ongoing learning of the pragmatic aspects of the language and the social rules of the culture. I also believe that teachers find a paradox in a teacher whose name is English teaching English when her native language is Spanish. Nevertheless, if we want to travel this route of life with happiness, then we must learn to live with paradoxes, differences, and change.

As we introduced ourselves to each other, I tried to find a familiar face, a name to hold on to, a first friend to help me learn the practices and people of the school. There were too many faces, as I should have expected when the principal told me the numbers at my interview: A staff of forty-four teachers was in charge of the more than 650 children who attended Hope Elementary, with a Hispanic population over fifty percent (<http://accountability.doe.k12.ga.us/report1999>).

The student population has experienced rapid changes at Hope Elementary. Table I shows data from the state's website (<http://accountability.doe.k12.ga.us/report2000/>) for the years 1997-1998 through 2001-2002, as shared by the principal at our first face-validity interview on July 9, 2002.

The highest changes in enrollment are those of the White population, with a decline of 24.8 percent from 1997-1998 school year to the 2001-2002 school year, and that of Hispanics, with an increase of 26.1 percent within the same period. The percentage of students served in

ESOL has also increased (19.1 percent) at an average rate of 4.7 percent per school year, with its highest percent (5.5) between 2000-2001 and 2001-2002.

Table 1. Demographic changes at Hope Elementary. Academic years 1997-1998 through 2001-2002. Source: Interview with principal, as extracted from the State's website at: <http://accountability.doe.k12.ga.us/report2000/>.

Year	1997-1998	1998 – 1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
Enrollment:					
White	56.8% (N=321)	46.5% (N=283)	39.9% (N=260)	33.9% (N=235)	32.0% (N=224)
Black	9.2% (N=52)	9.9% (N=60)	10.3% (N=67)	9.4% (N=65)	10% (N=70)
Hispanic	31.9% (N=180)	41.4% (N=251)	46.9% (N=306)	52.8% (N=366)	58% (N=407)
Total	(N=565)	(N=608)	(N=652)	(N=693)	(N=701)
Free/Reduced Lunch	65.3% (N=369)	66.6% (N=404)	71.2% (N=464)	73.9% (N=518)	74% (N=518)
Served ESOL*	9.9% (N=56)	14.8% (N=90)	18.9% (N=123)	23.5% (N=163)	29% (N=202)
Turnover Rate					
Number entered	222	235	255	205	177
Number Withdrawn	221	175	220	209	165
Total E/W	443	410	475	414	342
% of Change	78.4%	67.4%	72.8%	59.7%	48.7%

Interestingly, changes in the percentage of students who benefit from free and reduced lunch (FRL) are comparatively lower than the enrollment growth of Hispanics (HE). The ratio HE (Hispanic Enrollment) to FRL (Free and Reduced Lunch) between the school years

1997-1998 and 1998-1999 was 9.5/1.3 percent, compared to 5.5/4.6 percent between 1998-1999 and 1999-2000; 5.9/2.7 between 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, and to 5.2/0.1 percent between 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Therefore, it can be seen that the increase in the enrollment of Hispanics has been approximately 1 – 52 times higher than the increase in free and reduced lunches served. The available data does not allow us to determine whether such changes are due to myths about Hispanics that portray them as living in poverty and their taking advantage of social services, or if such differences are due to their lack of awareness or access to available assistance; thus, this phenomenon is worthy of further inquiry.

According to an interview with the school principal, the staff of 32 teachers in 1998 increased to 66 in 2001-2002, with a 68 percent faculty changes due to transfer, retirement, or resignation between 1997-1998 and 2001-2002 (November 2002). Therefore, the teacher/student ratio has fluctuated between 17.65 students per teacher in 1997-1998 to 10.62 students per teacher in the year 2001-2002. It is important to note, the 20 percent increase in the ESOL population between 1997-1998 and 2001-2002, as well as students receiving special education services, affects such [homeroom] teacher/student ratios, allowing teachers to teach at least one hour a day fewer students than those initially enrolled in their classrooms.

For the past five years, Hope Elementary has been on the state list of schools cited as needing improvement in the county. Nevertheless, in a recent report by the Regional Educational Southern Agency (RESA), the team concluded that for the years 1997 through 2000, “there is some evidence to indicate that when the standardized test scores are disaggregated by ethnicity, that regardless of ethnicity, students are making one year of academic growth for each year they are in school” (November 2001, p. 12). The RESA team also concluded that



Generally, and not surprisingly, white students score considerably higher on standardized tests than [sic] Hispanic students due to the Hispanic students' limited background in the English language. The school's non-Hispanic student population scores in a range much more consistent with the national average than the Hispanic population. (p. 11)

Valdés (2001) pointed out that the problem of learning English is not simple, as several forces and “structures of dominance in society interact with educational structures and educational ideologies as well as with teachers' expectations and with students' perspectives about options and opportunities” (p. 4). Equally, she argues, the difficulty of learning English [and I add, learning *in English*] is compounded by the amount of time students need to appropriate discourse and rhetoric of subject matter, and by difficulties encountered in teaching the students the course content matter using English as a medium of instruction (See also O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Krashen, 1982, 1989).

The RESA review team recommended that to improve academic performance, the school should closely monitor student achievement and align the school's mission and goals with their expectations of teachers and their staff development courses. They also recommended that the school's leadership personnel could establish appropriate mechanisms that promote dialogue between school staff and parents on improving the quality of work provided to students and develop structures that allow teachers, parents, and students to collaboratively and routinely examine the quality of work provided for, and produced by, students, e.g., student-led, portfolio-based parent conferences. (p. 24)

Thus, the RESA team pointed out the need for communication *and* collaboration between the school and families as an avenue to improve academic achievement at Hope Elementary. In spite of such recommendations, one-on-one parent-teacher meetings that usually take place at the end of some grading periods were not conducted during the year of this study at Hope Elementary. Equally, several staff members exercised a protective model of home/school interactions (Swap, 1993), as will be seen in chapters 4 and 6.

### *Swimming Against the Current of Segregation*

One of the first efforts of the current administration at Hope was to welcome families of all nationalities. Consequently, they examined previous efforts to involve minority parents and encouraged the improvement of such practices in order to provide opportunities for interaction and valuing of multiple cultures. One such practice was translating PTO meetings into Spanish.

In preceding years, the school held separate PTO meetings for Anglo and Hispanic parents, as Angelica, a mother who is a co-investigator in this study, described:

*Y pues, íbamos a las reuniones del PTO al principio, pero luego después, como era un poco aparte, entonces mi esposo pensaba que nos hacían a un lado y luego dice, ay, es bien, bien cortito y nos dicen bien poquito allá, y nosotros aparte, mejor no hay que ir. Los Americanos iban al lunche y los Latinos éramos un grupo muy pequeño, pero íbamos a la librería y ahí una de las maestras del programa de migrantes nos decía los puntos a tratar. Brevemente. Y nos servía para informarnos un poco y ya aprovechábamos también para hablar con ella acerca de los niños y todo.”* [And, well, we went to the PTO meetings at the beginning, but later on, as (the meetings) were held apart (from Anglo parents) then my husband thought that they were pushing us aside and then he said, (the

meetings) are very, very short and they tell us very little over there, and we are kept apart, it would be best that we do not go anymore. Americans went to the lunchroom, and Latinos were a very small group, but we went in the library and there, one of the teachers in the migrant program would tell us the points of discussion (on the agenda). Briefly. And that helped us to be informed a little, and we took advantage (of those moments) to talk with her about the children, and all]. (Angélica. Interview transcript)

The new administration initiated the use of a bilingual agenda, that we handed to every person in attendance, as well as the simultaneous translation of the discussion and questions from and to English and Spanish. Such arrangements also allowed Hispanics to take part in decision-making through their vote. Soon the school began to hear complaints that the meetings were taking too long, and that the school could provide a “written summary” of key points for Hispanic parents to read instead of translating on the spot. In a firm yet gentle manner, the administration continued to hold bilingual meetings.

Facilitating communication in their native language encouraged Hispanic parents to attend in larger numbers. At our first PTO meeting, only one Hispanic and about five Anglo parents attended, but the second meeting drew more Spanish-speaking people. When the families learned about the opportunities now available to them, the numbers continued to increase as more parents visited the school and attended school-related activities, and new channels of communication were explored, including written notes and phone calls.

In an initial effort to foster communication with parents, the school administration sought out a bilingual person to assist in various capacities in the office and in communications with teachers, but lack of funding halted such efforts. They included me in the team and I juggled my

schedule to translate important communications, one of them being the Monday Folder sent home on the first working day of the week throughout the school year. Printed on the folder are the school calendar and special events, the school code of conduct, and procedures for emergencies. The school uses this folder to send additional important information to the families such as school news, homework, and progress reports. It also serves as a way for the parents to send notes and messages to the school, for as it has been noted that many times, Hispanic children tend not to deliver written communications (Valdés, 1994; journal entries). The children brought their folders home every Monday. Still some parents were not aware of the purpose of the folder, the group revealed this during our third meeting. Therefore, I made a point to talk about the folder to all Spanish-speaking parents upon contact with them.

A second effort by the school to welcome Hispanic parents was coordinated by the Parent-Community and ESOL Committees, both of which I was a member, to offer workshops in Spanish on helping the children with homework. The response of the parents was overwhelming and, as the music room filled, we opened its doors to accommodate parents and other adult relatives in the hallways. In view of such attendance, the school conducted a survey, asking parents' input on topics and times to meet again. The responses indicated that the parents were mostly concerned with helping the children succeed in school, i.e., with homework and school behavior, and that the best time to meet was on Thursday afternoons or on Saturdays.

Other strategies to welcome parents in the school during our first year working at Hope Elementary included the translation of important letters, phone calls, and simultaneous translation at sensitive individual parent-teacher-administrator meetings. Although we understood that my primary responsibility was to teach my ESOL students, yet because I was the only native speaker of Spanish in the staff, occasional emergencies caused the administration to

cancel some of my classes to translate for them, generating resentment among and conflict with some of the staff. At the district level, the ESOL program focused on efforts to involve parents, which in the second year of my working at Hope Elementary led to the funding of a parent liaison position at the school.

Thus, my first years at Hope Elementary confirmed that Hispanic parents were willing to support the school, attend meetings, and participate in events such as PTO planned fund-raising and seasonal events such as the Harvest Ball, Breakfast with Santa, and Spring Fling, when the school made efforts to reach out to them. The parents were also very much interested in helping their children to learn and achieve, as attested by the large numbers who attended meetings about parenting (92 parents) and homework (78 parents), by their interactions with homeroom teachers when I translated for them (summarized in my journals), and by their responses to adult classes to learn English offered by the school, and a local college (see also Garrett, 2000, p. 16). Our task as administrators and teachers consisted not only of establishing communication with Hispanic parents, but also of persistently encouraging the acknowledgment and acceptance of this group as part of the school and of the learning environment in and by the community.

Several teachers joined our search for answers to the challenge of working with Hispanic children and parents, yet others remained at a distance, scared and expectant. As the children continued to be, like myself, in the middle, I set out to understand their environment in a joint search with their families. A sense of the cultural, political, social, and economic environment began to emerge through dialogic exchanges with their families, some of which I will discuss in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE EDUCATION OF HISPANIC CHILDREN: A GAME THAT IS NOT A GAME

*“We have only four Hispanic children in our county, but their parents are very smart: They all speak good English”* (conversation with a teacher, June 2003).

As Hispanics continue to grow into the largest minority in the United States (Rodríguez, 2003, Armas, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), academic achievement in its school-age population increasingly becomes a focus of attention (see, for instance, Amanti, Neff, Moll, and González, 1992; Conchas, 2001; Gitlin, Buendía, Crosland, and Doumbia, 2003, López, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdés, 1996, 2001). School-age Hispanics have been a concern for policy-makers and communities (Wooten, 1999) because of high dropout and pregnancy rates, increased gang activity (Hartstein, 2002, B1, B 6; Poole, 2002), and very large gaps between high achievers and low achievers. Such difficulties could be related to societal constraints and schooling experiences of Hispanics.

Several studies discuss institutional factors affecting schooling for these children. Conchas (2001) reported on the role of school culture<sup>8</sup> and support networks in developing critical consciousness among Hispanics in his ethnographic study, derived from a larger study in an urban high-school district. Based on data collected through interviews, participant observation, and examination of site documents, the author concluded that academically struggling minorities, though cognizant of societal inequalities affecting them, develop a

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson and Deal (1999) defined school culture as “(a) set of informal expectations and values (that) shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools” (cited in: Conchas, 2001, p. 484).

motivation to achieve and to become successful if the school provides them with the *social scaffold*, the support to learn the system, with opportunities to build networks, and a variety of programs to choose from (e. g., “traditional” schooling versus college preparation programs). Such a motivation appears related to both institutional forces and methods. Developing such motivation requires a team of adults who care about each individual student; curriculum and opportunities closely related to the students’ experiences and social environment and team work that focuses on providing healthy competition, or the encouragement of each student rather than individual competition, as well as, on-site training and experiences related to the students’ vocational inclinations (Conchas, 2001).

Gitlin et al. (2003) studied discourses and practices outside the classroom to research what forces shape achievement of Hispanics outside the “black box” (Gitlin et. al, Valdés, 2001) of the classroom. The authors concluded that such discourses and practice create center and margin at the institutional, i.e., school, level, forcing ESL students (and I add, *their* families) to the margin, thus generating disempowerment and academic and social inequalities. Both Conchas (2001) and Gitlin et al. concluded that institutional practices do in fact shape immigrant students’ achievement and social adaptation. They also claimed that conflicts of interests are at the core of the stereotyping of these students (see also Cummins, 2001). Gitlin et al. claimed that such stereotyping and disempowering practices are a result of specific agendas to advance particular interests; however, Baker & Keogh (1995) argued that often such conflicts of interest reveal a moral game that points at how individuals construct their public roles and deal with their own accountability (see chapter 6).

Based on “conceptual and empirical works” in which he re-examined the education of immigrant children in global societies, Suarez-Orozco (2001, p. 352) discussed a *tri-modal*

*pattern of school adaptation* among Hispanics that includes children whose grades surpass those of their American peers, those who achieve at the same level, and those who lag behind their American peers. These patterns of adaptation point at more complex structures that could be traced back to economic and historical conditions of current societies (technological advances, market variations and production, and immigration rates), as well as cultural, social, and political backgrounds and experiences of the families (parental styles and the value placed on education by the families, as will be discussed below). According to Valdés (1996), to understand differential achievement of Mexican (Hispanic) children, one must approach the analysis from a bi-national framework (p. 29). Nevertheless, the question continues to be, why do Hispanics, regardless of their migration status of first or higher generation, and regardless of their economic background, exhibit such disproportionate differential levels of achievement? What frames achievement or failure for this community? First, I submit we must seek for answers in the praxis, or lack of it, of *triad relationships* of schools, families, and students (Coleman, 1998), as well as in the surrounding community and larger political spheres.

Gitlin et al. (2003) pointed at the relationship between discourse, human activity, and decision-making in the production of a center and margin in a school setting. Because language is the human communication tool per excellence, a means to establish triad relationships, it is important to briefly examine two basic hypotheses about the academic learning of language by minority children. These hypotheses attempt to explain, mostly from a deficit perspective, the role of families and their support of schooling of Hispanic children in American schools. The *language mismatch hypothesis* claims that children who speak a language different from that spoken in the school are more likely to achieve below their mainstream American peers. The *socialization mismatch hypothesis* places responsibility on the school, family, and community,



arguing that low academic achievement is a result of different practices and beliefs about schooling held by families and schools, and that such differences also become a factor in communication between these three groups (Faltis, 1997; Valdés, 1996). Faltis noted, however, that it is not possible to isolate a single factor to account for the differences in the achievement of Hispanic children, which appears connected to all of these factors: a mismatch in language and socialization practices and to institutional factors that exclude these students (and their families) from school and learning processes (see also Valdés, 1996).

*Language Mismatch: Fear, power, and the fallacy of achievement.*

As the Hispanic population in the U.S. grows, an increasing number of teachers are taking up the challenge to learn how to work with English Language Learners (ELLs). These teachers modify instruction and apply a range of strategies to welcome the students in their classroom, and capitalize on the students' experiences as a learning resource for other students and for themselves (Gitlin et al., 2003; Valdés, 2001). Yet several scholars have attested to some staff's reluctance to receive Hispanics in their classrooms. Gitlin et al. noted that ESL students in a public school "were experiencing a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 94) and that such practices "placed them on the margins of school life (p. 93). As the demands on teachers increase by the year to make them more "accountable" for learning processes among the children they teach (Freeman and Freeman, 2003, p. 34), ELLs are viewed as an additional burden. Not only must teachers accommodate and modify classroom instruction to fit the needs of these children; they have also to document every process, every meeting, and every action in connection with all students and for which ELLs represent extra tasks (Gitlin et. al., 2003).

For ELLs, academics entail learning the everyday language of their new mainstream society and learning in the academic language of that society, including new standards and

cultural ways. As Suarez-Orozco (2001) pointed out, teachers play an important role in presenting the students with opportunities to learn both (p. 346). However, some teachers appear frightened to have to teach students whose language they do not comprehend, while others believe that Hispanics ought to “go back to their countries of origin” because they are “taking advantage of the system” (field notes, see chapter 1). In sum, educating immigrant language minority children poses challenges for the school as an institution, particularly among teachers who must retrain and adapt to accommodate the needs of the new population (Gitlin, et al. 2003).

Fear and the exercise of power is evidenced in various spheres in the lives of Hispanic learners and their families, the most contusive and subtle being attempts made against their language and cultural identity. A common practice outside the classroom is the recommendation made by some staff members to Spanish-speaking parents not to interact with their child in their native language. Arguing that parents who do not speak English well should not attempt to read or write with their child in Spanish, schools exhibit fallacious view of literacy as language-specific, unrelated to intrinsic factors such as motivation, identity, interest and opportunities for extending acquired knowledge outside the classroom. This focus of schooling on immediate results or curriculum-centered goal achievement becomes a propagandistic, political tool rather than a means to develop individual potential, in flagrant disregard of learning processes that build on the child’s background, knowledge and experiences, processes that develop his or her motivation to become an avid, skilled lifelong learner.

The role of the family as a crucial institution in the education of children has been explored from the outside, with no true participation of the families (parents) in the analysis and/or research process. Guadalupe Valdés (1996) expressed her concerns about schools’ efforts to involve Hispanic families/parents because, she claimed, such interventions aim at changing

families. Although her concerns could be valid from a cultural perspective as she defends the Hispanic family from being acculturated to the (North) American way, I contend that (1) education functions as an agent to oppress or to liberate, to marginalize or to foster participation (see Freire, 1986); and (2) due to their immigration experiences and by virtue of their voluntary or involuntary immersion in a new culture, the family support system, rules, and structures of authority of Hispanics have already changed.

The first point, that of education as an agent to opportunity, is at the core of this dissertation and is discussed throughout the chapters. The second argument is supported by several writers such as Richard Rodriguez, who beautifully exemplifies in his memoir (1982) the influence of school and family in his learning experiences:

I'd admit, for one thing, that I went to an excellent grammar school. (My earliest teachers, the nuns, made my success their ambition.) And my brother and both my sisters were very good students. (They often brought home the shiny school trophies I came to want.) And my mother and father always encouraged me. (At every graduation they were behind the stunning flash of the camera when I turned to look at the crowd.) (p. 44)

By Rodriguez' own account, three forces influenced his school success: committed teachers, older siblings who modeled achievement in English, and supportive parents who established clear goals and expectations for their children (see also Coleman, 1998). Yet, Rodriguez paid a price for his academic success: a loss of intimacy with his family, as he chose the public image mediated by English over the private image allowed by Spanish at home. In an argument that aligns with Rodriguez' experiences, Conchas (2001) concluded that a price to

academic success Hispanics pay is “stress and isolation” (p. 493) from their peers and from their own home culture.

Rodriguez’ memoir, while explicitly arguing against bilingual education, paints a painful, disengaging process by which the new (American) culture changed the dynamics in his family, slowly moving parents and children apart. As the children realized their parents’ low English proficiency, their parents’ inability to help them with school work, and observed the accented, difficult communication exchanges in their second language, they sensed their differences and perceived the adults to be deficient. Such perceptions were fostered in the public arena in which the children interacted. In contrast, as I will show in later chapters, my research suggests that children whose parents are acknowledged and valued in the school and community grow more confident and appreciative of their parents’ efforts to provide them with new and enhanced learning environments while the parents maintain their position of authority and support in the family.

Thus, we can see that the language mismatch between school and family deeply impacts the structure of the Hispanic family, yet I interpret such a mismatch as a product of power *and fear* rather than as a deficit. Although their motives could be well intentioned, as when teachers focus on developing English language skills on the children, the schools and the Anglo community exercise their power when they tamper with communications and interactions of Hispanic parents and children in their home language.

Language plays a crucial role in the dynamics of the family. High achievers come from families with authoritative parents (Deslandes et al. 1997). To be authoritative means to be able to navigate the system, to be knowledgeable about ways to support a child’s autonomy while, at the same time, exercising control, releasing that control to the child as he or she grows and

emotionally matures. In being authoritative, language is a very important tool, one that parents use on a daily basis to perform their socially (and morally/ethically) assigned parenting duties. It is also language what enables families to entertain communications conducive to learning, and learning is more than an academic focus. Learning is acquiring dispositions, skills, and motivation for the future; it is acquiring practical knowledge, skills, and abilities to interact, to navigate the system, and to play by the rules of the society and groups in which people immerse.

#### *Parenting Traits and Parental Involvement*

Many authors have studied the benefits and characteristics of parental/family involvement in the academic achievement of children (Colemann, 1998; Cummins, 2001; Deslandes et al., 1997; Leichter, 1997; López, 2001; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Deslandes et al. (1997), as well as Grolnick & Ryan (1989), linked parental involvement in school to parental styles, because students with high achievement seem to belong to families with specific parenting traits. In their studies, parents of students with higher achievement supported the acquisition of autonomy in the child (Grolnick & Ryan) while exercising authoritative styles of parenting (Deslandes et al.).

These studies surveyed and interviewed students and parents to ascertain which factors enhanced achievement. Deslandes et al. (1997) conducted their study with secondary students in the Quebec-Appalachian region to assess the influence of parental style on the academic achievement of the students. Grolnick & Ryan (1989) interviewed elementary students and their parents in New York to “investigate how relevant parent practices are associated not only with achievement per se, but also with the development of attitudes, motives, and self-evaluative outcomes that facilitate negotiation of the social and cognitive demands of the school” (p. 143).

Parental style is characterized by the factor of control, defined as “parental monitoring and supervision” (Deslandes et al., 1997, p. 195) as related to the development of autonomy. In the Deslandes et al study, *authoritative* parenting was characterized by a balance between control and autonomy and yielded children who achieve higher than those children whose parents were *authoritarian* (excessive control, no autonomy support), *indulgent* (little or no control) or *neglectful*.

Grolnick & Ryan, (1989) found that a specific parenting trait, structure, or “the extent to which parents provide clear and consistent guidelines, expectations, and rules . . . would not necessarily predict self-regulation” as children mature, because a “high degree of structure” could either support or undermine autonomy (p. 144). This study suggests that children who achieve high have developed specific traits of self-regulation, and Deslandes et al. (1997) concluded, an important strategy in developing such traits is parenting styles.

In both studies the parents of high achieving children provided a learning structure at home that facilitated and encouraged academic achievement. The ability of the parents to provide such a structure (i.e., resources, a place to study, support, and praise) is connected to agency and cultural capital, both of which, I argue, are facilitated when the families are aware of both the game and the rules, strategies, and resources available to them to play such a game.

#### *Academic Achievement, Learning, and Parental Involvement: A Game in Perspective*

Some sociologists suggest that group behavior is susceptible to analysis as a game. In a game, two or more players interact, strategically or impulsively, to obtain a goal that might be a common goal (cooperative, coordination games) or an individual goal (zero-sum games, or when players play to win or lose). Game theorists call that goal or outcome a “payoff” (Bartos, 1967).

In the case of social interactions, the prize for winning the game varies from concrete recompenses such as money to abstract rewards such as recognition and power.

Game theorists such as Binmore (1994) and Bartos (1967) agree that von Neumann and Morgenstern were the first proponents of game theory, a discipline that emerged from mathematical models and was adapted to study social phenomena. Abell (1991) claimed that game theory is also rational choice theory, since it studies how players make choices in rational or irrational ways. I have reinterpreted Abell's claim in order to argue that game theory can help parents understand how to make *informed* rather than *rational* choices, about their involvement in their children's education.

The purpose of this research is to study parental involvement using Bourdieu's concept of games, to understand the rules and regularities uncovered as Hispanic parents became involved in the education of their children. Researchers such as López (2001) and Voss (1993) showed that parental involvement encompasses several domains including parent-child interactions at home and in the workplace, and other authors (Deslandes et al., 1997; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Lam, 1997) have argued that parenting traits and practices are an important component in enhancing academic achievement. Still other scholars are concerned about how parents and schools can enhance academic learning, and have proposed several models to bring families and school together to achieve such a goal. Because parental involvement takes place both in public and private spheres, it is important to analyze what parents and schools do together, and what processes take place in the private realm of the family, as reported by the parents.

Parent/family participation in school entails certain expectations and institutional rules, cultural knowledge of the rules, and the ability to play by those rules. The characterization of parental involvement is grounded in relationships and regulated by norms, mores and values that

by definition are shaped within a given society. These relationships evolve around specific goals, and the achievement of those goals depends upon the strategies employed by the actors. Thus, game theory and the metaphor of the game can help us understand parental involvement as it is envisioned by its respective players, including their payoffs, the strategies used to play or avoid the game, and the resources available to all players to support or play the game. Drawing on game theory, I will put in perspective the strategies and processes in which the players engaged, as well as on the payoffs they sought out and the actual outcomes of such games for the players.

I will begin by acknowledging that although I envisioned the study of parental involvement as a game, parental involvement revealed itself as actually a strategy to play a larger game in which neither player has a say in terms of the *expected* outcomes, though they can impact the *actual* end results. The payoff of the game, called “academic achievement,” is externally dictated and measured according to social and political interests. Assuming that the players have a common understanding of the game, we could expect them to play in a collaborative way. This is also a strategy that would allow players active participation or involvement in re-shaping the game, attending to the individual interests and characteristics of the child. A collaborative environment would support mutual learning while re-aligning expected payoffs with those dictated by a combination of the child’s characteristics and expectations, the family’s goals and values, the teacher’s professional ethics and his or her assessment of the child, and the socio-historical present in which they all live. As all players learn about each other, from each other, and about the game itself, they acquire new strategies to enhance their roles in their personal and professional lives, facilitating the development of an *empowerment* model as proposed by Delgado-Gaitán (1990, 1991, 1996).



Reexamining home/school collaborations as they are actually taking place, it can be noted that the players cannot and do not engage in collaborative or cooperative games, as payoffs have different, often opposite meanings to them. In part, due to social and political constraints, the game of schooling of children in public schools has shifted from focusing on the child, to scrutinizing the adult's actions under a pretended (moral and professional) *accountability*. Moreover, the players are isolated from each other, often regarding other players as the enemy rather than as their allies, their team members in the game. Such an isolation is a product of power structures that alienate the players, as will be seen in chapter 4.

For the educational institution (i.e., nation, state, school district), the goal is related to how students perform on standardized tests. To comply with that goal many teachers seek to either prepare the students to “succeed” on such tests, or to move along with the group of students who are “learning” while “dragging” those left behind (Suarez-Orozco, 1989). Depending on their understanding of the game and on how they envision their roles in such a game, some teachers may choose to impact the everyday lives of children, learning about their environments and helping them re-shape their learning and find new goals; yet, this position often uncovers contradictions with the goals of parents, and so teachers and parents hesitate to interfere in each other's realm.

When teachers and families *unite to play the game* they learn about the public and private environment of the child, finding possible explanations for what influences his or her disposition and ability to learn. In this game they play as equal partners, acknowledging that both can make important contributions as they learn together about the game, about the child, and about themselves as individuals and players. This is accomplished as they approach the game as critical learning that ensures real participation and lifelong learning. Thus the game is not just

about partnerships or collaborations. It should be intentional, critical learning intended to extend the players' opportunities for citizenship through active participation. In this context, parental involvement, like teaching, becomes a process of discovery and agency.

Parental involvement in American schools is a controversial topic. Researchers and practitioners cannot agree exactly what it entails (Baker and Soden, 1998; Vandergrift and Greene, 1992). The controversy deepens when the actions carried out by the schools and practitioners question disadvantaged children's "parents and their ability to 'support' their children's education" (Valdés, 1996, p. 17). Concerns are growing about cultural differences and how they affect parental involvement practices in school settings (Delgado-Gaitán, 1996; Ogbu, 1992; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Walsh, 1991). The discussion centers on three questions:

1. What is parental involvement and, most importantly, what are the goals for such involvement?
2. What do parents and families bring to the actions connected with such goals? and
3. What cultural and political forces interplay in those actions?

A review of literature and an examination of actual practices indicate that parental involvement in schools requires at least three actors: a parent, a child, and (representatives of) the school (Coleman, 1998). I also submit that communities play an important role as well. The actors interact to accomplish a goal, and Valdés (1996) clarifies for us that the goal has to do with "supporting" their children's education, though, again, that 'support' can encompass a number of meanings. Such interactions take on several forms as will be seen in the following chapters.

The pervading question of how to improve the learning of Hispanics in American public schools deserves to be re-examined. Valdés (1996) voiced her concerns about parental

involvement practices in American public schools, fearing that they aim at changing families, coaching them on how to be better parents by European American middle class cultural standards. In my pilot study, conducted in Mexico and Colombia, all participant parents pointed out that parenting is not a finished product but an ongoing process of learning by doing: interacting with their children, other parents, and schools, supported by references to the media and published documents to extend such learning. Learning is cultural and responds to the demands of mainstream society and to the socio-historical needs of the learner. Because such learning can be manipulated into indoctrination, it is necessary to examine the learning processes that parental involvement entails.

In enhancing learning opportunities for these students, four actors (families, schools, children (learners), and communities) must interact, and in doing so, all four should become learners. These actors need to agree upon three important questions:

1. what are the learners to achieve [in terms of the game metaphor, in what types of games do they want to get involved?]
2. why learners need to achieve these goals [in terms of their long-term goals and payoffs, and whether or not they envision the learner as a totality], and
3. how can the players optimize and support the acquisition of their goals (strategies).

In addition, policy that encourages and facilitates relationships between these groups must emerge. Current policy makes schools accountable for academic achievement and for reaching (i.e., “involving”) parents, yet, it is not clear how schools are to attain such goals.

To answer these questions, all four actors must engage in dialogues and negotiation in order to understand the game of schooling and learning as related to the child’s interests. As discussed earlier, learning encompasses both public and private spheres in the life of an

individual. The respective roles of significant adults both at school and in the home to guide, support, and help discover students' potential and vocational orientation cannot be ignored or simply dismissed. In my view, dialogues between the schools and Hispanic parents are necessary in order to provide the students with the culture-specific support they need, as well as to provide the adults with the crucial information they require to accomplish their common goals. Such dialogues aim at improving learning and schooling of the students and will generate teams of adults focused on enhancing the participation and learning opportunities of all players through agency, critical learning, and education.

By their own cultural standards Hispanic parents need to be authoritative in raising their children (López, 2001; Rodríguez, 1982; Valdés, 1996). That is to say, they need to develop strategies to support their children in their gradual acquisition of autonomy, while maintaining the parents' position of authority and *respeto* (Valdés, 1996) as perceived by the child, and therefore the school system must support, rather than undermine that position.

*Parental Involvement: An overlooked strategy to Critical Learning*

Attempting to find solutions to the various educational outcomes of Hispanics, scholars are suggesting ways schools can provide better learning opportunities for all children. Some look into the school culture and practices, and proponents of theories for social justice and socio-cultural theory indicate that schools must take into account the cultural background and everyday practices in which the children are immersed (Nieto, 1992; Moll and Gonzales, 1994; Walsh, 1991). Expanding on this notion, I submit that a holistic education encompassing the daily experiences of the learner must take place, with the family playing a crucial role in encouraging, supporting and extending academic and non-academic learning (see chapter 7).

Authoritative parents are knowledgeable about their child(ren), society, and the system in general. They have a repertoire of strategies and goals for their children which they apply to childrearing, as well as a network of sources and resources upon which to draw. Nevertheless, many schools still believe that parents must take an active, participative role in the schooling of their children, and that such participation can only be accomplished by the parents physical presence in the school.

A review of literature on the topic of parental involvement reveals a wealth of initiatives ranging from policy to practice. The studies cover a broad range of topics, including scrutiny of teacher education courses aimed at preparing teachers to work with parents (Alleksaht-Snider & Schwartz, 2001; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopez, 1997), ethnographic inquiries describing the lives of parents and children (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1991, Leichter, 1997, Valdés, 1996) with a focus on how parents get involved in the education of their children (López, 2001), collaborative inquiries and descriptions of experiences (Mashishi, 1997; Shockley, Michalove and Allen, 1995), and school models versus school practices of parental involvement (Barclay and Boone, 1996, Branston and Provis, 1999, Chavkin, 1993, Dietz, 1997, Swapp, 1993, McCaleb, 1994, Moles, 1993, Phelps, 1999, Rioux and Berla, 1993). Other researchers have looked at family relationships and how parents influence academic achievement (Deslandes et al., 1997; Gordon, 1979; Grolnick and Ryan, 1989; Lam, 1997; Leichter, 1984). Still other studies look at social and historical characteristics of those ‘researched’ (I will discuss this term elsewhere) including funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzalez, and Amanti, 1995; McCarthey, 1997; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992) and cultural capital (Laureau, 1987) while yet another category addresses meta-theoretical issues that include underlying definitions of what

constitutes parental involvement (Baker and Soden, 1993, Laureau, 1989, Vandergrift and Greene, 1992). Although many authors are still searching for answers, they are progressively focusing on Hispanics, attributable mainly to this group's leading dropout rates in the region and in the nation (Salzer, 2001). These descriptive, analytic, and action research studies lack an important component, that of a participatory action research that uncovers alienation, oppression and marginalization such as I experienced and detected while teaching in American public schools.

Researchers have linked parental involvement to academic achievement as they argue that when families take part in school activities and/or provide adequate learning environments at home, the academic performance (i.e., grades) of their children improves (Cummins, 2001; Deslandes et al., 1997; Grolnick and Ryan, 1989; Lam, 1997; Leichter, 1997). However, as I stated earlier, researchers and practitioners hold different views about what constitutes parental involvement and what it does for the families themselves (Wolfendale, 1992).

In the absence of a consensual definition, one can look at what researchers claim to be the benefits of working or communicating with parents in the schools. Grolnick and Ryan (1989) conceptualized parental involvement as "... the extent to which the parent is interested in, knowledgeable about, and takes an active part in the child's life" (p. 144). Other researchers and educators (Branston and Provis, 1999; DeGroat, 1997; Foster, 1997; Giles, 1998; Mashishi, 1997; Wolfendale and Topping, 1996) submitted that parental involvement entails building links and bridges between school and home to improve the academic achievement of the child. López (2001) suggests that the involvement of marginalized families is not recognized because it happens in non "normative" ways (p. 417), thus, "involvement *can* consist of a number of

different activities, but only a few of these activities are acknowledged in the educational arena” (p. 418).

A glance at the background of parental involvement practices in the United States takes us to the late 1800s. According to Moles (1993), some of the first documents on home/school interactions show that parents formed groups to participate in school-related activities, especially building playgrounds and kitchens or lunchrooms. These organizations also had advisory functions and made curricular decisions. Moles stated that the National Congress of Mothers, which he claimed to be the precursor of the PTA, was founded in 1897 (p. 23).

Throughout history, parental involvement has acquired several connotations. For example, Rioux and Berla (1993) claimed that in early America, school and home had two clearly delineated functions in the education of children: Schools educated while parents reared. After the colonial period, public schools placed emphasis on a need for acculturating immigrant parents to the American way of life. This approach, also known as the “cultural reproduction theory,” draws on the assumption that the cultural background and experiences of newcomer (immigrant) or what Moles called “disadvantaged parents” do not match those of American born/grown parents, thus a need arises for supplementing those ‘deficiencies’ (Rioux and Berla. See also Valdés, 1996). The authors also claimed that after the Civil Rights movement in the nineteen sixties, the view that all parents have strengths and are capable of contributing to the education of their children took precedence over claims about their deficiencies, progressively giving way to a new movement that advocates the “empowerment” (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990) of these families.

Opponents to the deficit model believe that it is necessary to validate the culture and funds of knowledge (Moll and Gonzalez, 1994) of all families through practices that ensure full

participation in critical roles in the education of their children. Advocates of the cultural validation and empowerment theories suggest that ignoring the cultural background and everyday family practices creates confusion, and, I would add, a crisis of identity that will follow the children through adolescence and into adulthood. This could also explain many of the social problems of minority children, some of the most noticeable being academic failure and high dropout rates (Nieto, 1992; Walsh, 1991).

Even in definitions that include multicultural practices, what constitutes ‘participation’ is not clear (Delgado y Urdanivia, 1989; DeSchutter, 1986, Vincent, 1996), neither is it clear who decides what counts as participation and when and how parents participate, especially on the school site or at school-related events. Because of such gaps, it is necessary to examine the theories that underlie Latino families’ constructions of what it means to be involved in the education of their children and the everyday practices that encompass home/school interactions. It is also necessary to examine their goals for such interactions and what “knowledges” (Fals Borda, 2001) they bring to the task, as well as their expectations of the school and their attitudes toward the actions they are willing to undertake to attain their goals.

In brief, parental involvement in schools, at least from an institutional perspective, appears to consist of becoming part of the teaching team through participation in school activities and/or providing an adequate learning environment at home. The goal of such involvement is to enhance the academic achievement of the children, in what Vincent (1996) terms “a *supporter/learner* model” (p. 148).

### *Models of Parental Involvement*

In looking at models or paradigms of parental involvement it is necessary to differentiate *parental roles* from *interventions*. Parental roles are the specific actions and responsibilities



caregivers take within the specific delivery model (paradigm) in a particular school. Interventions are strategic actions that people or institutions undertake to achieve a goal or to solve a problem. Paradigms are, according to Kuhn, “a universally accepted set of presuppositions ... concerning the nature of the world, and ... the way we see the world” (quoted in Marková, 1982, p. 2). Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* defines paradigm as a “pattern, model, or example.” For the purposes of this study, a paradigm must be understood as both the actions and directions taken in each intervention model, as well as the assumptions underlying each of them.

Vincent (1996, p. 43-57) suggests “four main possibilities” which are offered to parents “with children in state schools,” and within those possibilities, parents and families play specific roles:

1. “*the parent as supporter/learner*” whose function is “to support professionals and adopt their concerns and approaches” (p. 44) buttressing the curriculum, “attending school educational events and supporting/organizing school social and fund-raising events” (p. 44). Such roles are specified by authors such as Moles (1993) and Gordon (1979), who submit that parents can be called upon as facilitators of learning at home and in the community, or as tutors (Rich, 1985) or teachers of their children (Gordon, 1979); as audience (Henderson, Marburguer, and Ooms, 1989), volunteers and paraprofessionals (Gordon, 1979), or aides; as learners of a pre-established curriculum intended to fit someone else’s needs, specifically those of the school as an institution (Stenmark, Thompson and Cossey, 1986, Vopat, 1994); as adult educators (Gordon, 1979); as collaborators or problem solvers (Henderson et al., 1989); and as community links, networkers, and advocates (Barclay and Boone, 1996).

2. “*the parent as consumer*” who “encourage[s] school accountability and high standards ... by choosing a school [and] receiving information as detailed in the Parents’ Charter [with a focus on] educational issues [of] individual child/children [and] limited involvement in management issues” (Vincent, 1996, p. 44).

3. “*the independent parent*,” who “maintain[s] minimal contact with the school [and who] may provide alternative forms of education [with a focus on] individual child/children” (Vincent, 1996, p. 44). These parents might choose not to participate or might not be able to do so because of their [economic, personal, linguistic/cultural] circumstances (p. 54).

4. “*the parent as participant*” who is concerned both with the education of individual children and with the functioning of the school as a whole (p. 55); however, such participation depends upon the parents’ cultural capital to navigate the system and upon their ability to attend school-related events which, in turn, is associated with their economic status. For instance, some disadvantaged parents might want to attend school events but not be able to do so because of a lack of transportation or babysitting services. Vincent contended this last is “the least common, and also the only option to offer opportunities for the exercise of individual and collective voice (p. 58). Epstein (2001) and Henderson et. al (1989) also discussed parents as partners, considered as “equals” in educating the children, and Epstein (2001) and Moles (1987) discussed parents as collaborators in decision-making activities.

Most researchers and practitioners drew on these ‘roles’ to propose their models, some of which are described below.

Community Impact Model. Gordon (1979) submitted that home, family and community all influence the education of children (p. 9). This author proposed six specific parental roles supporting the model: parents as teachers of their children, parents as classroom volunteers,

parents as paraprofessionals, parents as adult learners, parents as adult educators, and parents as decision makers.

Epstein's Six-Type Model (Epstein, 2001) in which the roles are specific. The parents are involved when they fulfill their basic obligations and responsibilities towards the child, but they can also become involved in the school when they volunteer, share their skills/interests, or contribute in areas of curriculum development. In addition, they can get involved at home as they supervise and encourage academic learning, a modality of involvement that is often facilitated by the schools by means of parent training. Parents can also become involved as they participate in school-wide decision-making via PTO meetings and advisory councils. In Epstein's model, the schools basic obligations are to develop communication with parents and to facilitate links with the community as well as to train parents to support learning activities at home.

Ecological Theoretical Framework (Martha Alleksaht-Snider). This model points at the influences of multiple variables in children's learning and suggests that interventions must take into account the complexity of these influences as a means to build bridges between schools and families, taking into account as well, the child as an individual and the teacher's and the families' respective cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values. One of the major innovations of this model is that it considers the nature of family-child-teacher interactions within the broader socio-cultural context (Personal communication, 1998).

Susan McAllister Swap (1993) identifies three models of parental involvement in schools and proposes a fourth:

The Protective Model, in which, basically, no parental involvement is allowed. The school protects itself from the 'intromission' of parents.

The School-to-Home Transmission Model, in which parents support learning at home.

The Curriculum Enrichment Model – Acknowledges parents’ contributions to the curriculum by virtue of their “Funds of Knowledge”, and

The Home/School Partnership Model, proposed by Swap. In this model, parents and schools collaborate to achieve their goals. The key components of this model are (a) two-way communications; (b) enhancing learning at home and school; (c) providing mutual support, and (d) making joint decisions.

Concha Delgado-Gaitán (1990) has identified three models: The Family Influence Model, which focuses on the home learning environment and expectations of parents; the School Reform Model in which parents participate in advisory committees; and the Cooperative Systems Model in which parents participate at various levels and capacities, from becoming trainees at workshops to being employed by the school. In her Empowerment Model she contends that any attempt to involve parents should allow for empowerment of all adults responsible for the education and care of the children at home.

Delgado-Gaitán conducted a ten-year critical ethnography in a California public school district. Her goal was “to research literacy in Latino family and community settings” (1996, p. 7) using a Freirean framework. Delgado-Gaitán’s prolonged immersion in the community aided in establishing close relationships with the families and the staff in the two schools the focal children attended, enhancing opportunities for dialogue between the researcher, the parents, and the school. As she encouraged the focal parents to participate ‘in an ethnographic analysis, [a small group of parents] organized . . . to support each other” (1996, p. 8). As a result, a committee of Latino parents (COPLA) emerged to improve literacy opportunities for their children both at home and at school. The parents asked for guidance from the staff on methods

to support reading at home. In the parent group, the parents also learned to question the institutional practices that prevented their children from profiting from their school experiences.

Delgado-Gaitán did not explicitly discuss her role in the research process. Nevertheless, her occasional, tangential references to her and the research team's engagement in critical exchanges and training of the COPLA leaders suggest the researchers' political role in shaping up and orienting both method and learning process in the group. In her two books that I reviewed for this dissertation, she underscored the role of education and awareness in bettering both individual and group opportunities for advocacy and decision-making. Such realization of their potential to influence their children's lives contributed to the empowerment of the parents in the COPLA group. At the same time, through joint critical reflection, the parents worked cooperatively with other parents and with school personnel to "maximize the individual's influence over his/'her own life" (1990, p. 2).

In most models of parental involvement, the school expects the parents to participate in the education of their children, yet the concept of participation is problematic in itself, as De Schutter (1986) pointed out. Participation is an important concept in collaborative or cooperative games, as it encompasses actions and processes that could lead to the success or failure in accomplishing the goals of the group. However, DeSchutter noted various levels of participation ranging from activism, or doing what others do to, to more complex ways of doing things that vary from taking part in, having part of, and being part of something.

Parents *take a part* in school events when they attend to those events, sit in for the required time, listen passively and uncritically, and leave after the events are over. Parents *have part* in school because their children attend the school, and they may show their "support" by sharing time and resources to help the school accomplish their goals, as when they volunteer.

Parents *are* part of the school when they take active, committed, and critical roles that benefit the school in general and the achievement of their children in particular.

In most models of “parental involvement” that have developed so far, participation reaches only the first two levels. Because *having part* in school is an obvious level of participation, I will focus on the two other levels in the following discussion about how participation takes place in the models of parental involvement that I have discussed in this chapter.

Parents *take part* in the school when their role focuses on mechanical tasks, such as, supporting learning and attending school events (Vincent, 1996), being an audience (Henderson, Marburguer, and Ooms, 1989), volunteers and paraprofessionals, (Gordon, 1979), aides and/or learners of the school curriculum (Epstein, 2001; Vopat, 1994) or when they engage in models of parental involvement such as McAllister Swap’s (1993) school-to-home transmission and curriculum enrichment models. Such “participation” is controlled by rules externally dictated by the school and/or the staff, with little or no decision-making by the parents.

In models that portray parents as collaborators or problem solvers (Henderson et al., 1989) or as community links, networkers, and advocates (Barclay and Boone, 1996), their role still remains separate from that of decision-making in the game, including long-term payoffs and strategies for their children. These appear to be collaborative games, yet, a closer examination reveals that the parents are not true players and have few possibilities to decide upon the goals and strategies for their children, in terms of the desired goal of envisioning them as long-term projects of life (See chapter 7).

Still other models of parental involvement focus on the accountability of the other, as is the case in what Vincent (1996) discussed as the *parent as consumer* model. Although she

reported a “focus on educational issues of individual child/children” (p. 44), the real goal is long-term, curriculum-oriented actions that for Hispanic parents usually shift towards discipline or placement in special education programs of the kind described in subsequent chapters.

Several models represent no-game models. Among them, Swap’s *protective model* (1993) and Vincent’s *independent parent* (1996), represent either the school’s goal to keep parents at bay or the parents’ inability or unwillingness to communicate with the school and become a player in the game.

True participation, according to DeSchutter (1986), involves *informed* decision-making in both the education of the child and the functioning of the school as a whole. Vincent (1996) discussed two specific models, the *parent as participant* and the *parent as citizen*. Nevertheless, for this kind of participation (i.e., *being part of* the education of their children) to take place, a number of things must also take place. First, parents, teachers, and children must become a team of learners, engaging in communication derived from mutual trust, respect, and acknowledgment of each other’s potential for teaching and learning. Second, the team must assess the game in terms of their payoffs, equilibrium, and strategies. Third, they need to assess the child’s abilities, interests, and potential, including their ecological reality. Fourth, the team must engage in joint search, discovery, planning, implementing, assessing, and readdressing of the game. This model, again, is very much in agreement with Concha Delgado-Gaitán’s *empowerment model* (1990, 1991).

#### *Factors that Affect Parental Involvement In Schools*

To summarize, the literature points at six related factors that interact to complicate the creation of partnerships among families and school.

1. Political and legal concerns at the national and state levels about the need to “involve” families and to hold schools accountable for the students’ academic achievement. Politics also influence parent participation in subtle ways, such as how power is exercised at all levels (and, especially, in the schools) and the ways in which families are excluded and marginalized, particularly disadvantaged parents (Vincent, 1996).

2. Attitudes and beliefs about schools, staff, and administrators. Researchers have found that attitudes and beliefs about schools affect the degree and the nature of parent involvement, concretely for families from different cultures. Feelings of insecurity grow when in addition to linguistic and cultural distances between schools and parents, the school personnel project negative attitudes in their interactions with families, leading to parents’ withdrawal from contact with schools (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, Valdés, 1994).

3. Previous experiences with schooling. Negative experiences in their own background may cause the parents to choose not to participate. In addition to feeling intimidated by schools, most parents who want to be involved lack the knowledge and the experience to do so (Ballenger, 1999; Moles, 1993).

4. Cultural and social capital. Immersion in the (target/mainstream) culture in general and in the school culture in particular appears to be an important factor in parental involvement. Such experiences provide parents with cultural capital related to knowledge of the school and the ability to communicate in the same language of the school. For instance, Valdés (1996, p. 5) contends that

Mexican working-class parents bring to the United States goals, life plans, and experiences that do not help them make sense of what schools expect of their children. At the same time, schools expect a “standard” family, a family whose



“blueprints for living” are based on particular notions of achievement. They have little understanding about other ways of looking at the world and about other definitions of success.

5. Economic limitations and an inability to miss work. In addition to limiting attendance at school events (Inger, 1992, Valdés, 1996), job and economic necessities may affect how available parents are to talk to teachers by phone, how long students stay at one school, and a host of issues that may be unfamiliar to middle class educators.

6. Problems in communication. Difference in language between school and home represents only one aspect of the difficulty. For instance, in the code (mainstream-English- vs. home language) and in the channel (face-to-face, oral, or written communications). Valdés (1996) has documented (and this is also my experience) that written messages sent by the school do not always make their way to the parents, as some children do not deliver them. In addition, the jargon of the school may be incomprehensible.

7. Misunderstandings regarding what constitute participation and involvement. Schools and parents often hold different views on what constitutes appropriate involvement. Schools may act as though the only things that count as parental involvement are attending school meetings, open house, and providing extra-curricular opportunities to the children. Parents may believe they are involved if they tell their children to behave at school.

Valdés (1996, 2001) studied the acquisition of English by ten Hispanic children as well as the socialization practices that took place in their families, arguing that parental practices in those families did not conform to the expected roles of parents in the American white middle class (AWMC). Although the parents did care about their children, she said, their interactions and rules were aimed at preparing them for a future life in accordance with their home culture.

Concretely, she submitted, education for the middle class represents an avenue for securing good living conditions, while for the upper class relationships are what matter and schooling is viewed as more of a means to get acquainted with –and marry—people within the same class level. For the poor, or lower socio-economic strata, the focus shifts from formal education to survival skills; thus, families focus on fostering traits that prepare children for immediate work, encouraging them to stay close to the family and to maintain core values such as respect, virginity (women), and physical and mental strength (men) (1996, p. 172-176). Thus, Valdés (1996) submitted, attempts to involve parents in American schools are, “in essence, interventionist. They are designed to change families” (p. 197).

My main difference with Valdés resides in the appraisal of strategic implementation of parental involvement within the context of school failure. Three basic arguments have developed to explain the differences in academic achievement among minorities: the *genetic* argument, the *cultural* argument, and the *class analysis* argument. The *genetic argument* claims racial/ethnic superiority of European/white people over black and Hispanic people, an argument that has been hotly contested and is seldom seriously considered in the current literature of achievement. Researchers—and practitioners—still ponder upon the two other explanations, the class analysis and cultural arguments, searching for strategies to either improve academic achievement or to explain the school failure-of minorities. As a result, such studies are based on their perception of the factors that affect such outcomes.

Valdés regarded institutional attempts to increase parental involvement as a strategy to overcome the cultural deficits of the children and their families, and she questioned the ethics of “the implementation of large-scale education programs designed to help these families become

less Mexican and more “mainstream”...” (1996, p. 13). I contend that increasing parental involvement while respecting the parents’ culture of origin is both possible and desirable.

My stance regarding academic achievement of Hispanic children in U.S. public schools is that combined factors frame such outcomes, and that both individual and institutional forces play into the way children are perceived and encouraged or disencouraged to learn. My use of the words “institution” and “institutional” refers to social organizations such as the school system both at local and national levels, specifically, to stated and implicit policies, rules, and regulations within which the institutions operate in a larger society.

I submit that neither the cultural nor the class analysis arguments can be discarded when attempting to understand practices that frame achievement within minority groups. This is especially true when no efforts are made to bridge differences and foster communication between families and schools. Depending on their understanding of the phenomena, current parental involvement efforts aim at acculturating families to the American way (cultural deficit argument *and* cultural reproductive model), or at acknowledging and valuing the backgrounds of children and families (cultural difference argument, risking exclusion from participation in their new society). Some efforts focus on perpetuating the *status quo* by the a-critical implementation of an externally prescribed curriculum, a curriculum that does not take into account the particular historical reality of the learner while seeking to prepare him or her to join the workforce (hegemonic-state reproductive model *and* economic-reproductive model). Yet, parental involvement can be a strategy for collaboration and mutual learning, an opportunity for critical assessment of both institutional and cultural practices in our daily lives, and thus become a catalyst for change.

People are, by nature, learners, for learning is an indispensable element of survival. Yet, Valdés is concerned about whether Mexican “children will survive as human beings” in America (1996, p. 201) if they are institutionally acculturated into the mainstream and suggests rather that their families should use “their resources, . . . their networks, and . . . their traditions . . . to produce “good” children.” (1996, p. 2020). Moreover, while she acknowledges the families’ need for acculturation in America she argues that they should be “allowed to become American at their own pace and in their own way.” (p. 205)

The purpose of education, whether formal or informal, is change. Such change affects people’s knowledge, abilities and skills, and dispositions. Yet the nature of such change depends on the type of education we advocate, whether an a-critical, banking education, or critical, problem-posing education to enhance a person’s humanness (Freire, 1982) and, ultimately, their living conditions. Thus, to say as Valdés does, that current efforts to foster education in the families should be barred from the discourse of achievement is a dangerous position. Examining parental involvement with a new lens allowed by chronological and methodological distance, I contend that the core of my difference from Valdés’s efforts to protect the families in her study resides in our respective beliefs about the nature and function of education, and my vision of the possibilities that critical education offers. Thus, I partially agree with Valdés’s critique of alienating and acculturating practices in many institutional efforts to increase parental involvement. However, I believe—as did the families in my study, that they cannot continue to be barred from learning to participate in the mainstream institution. Instead, we need to examine what is being done, how is it being done, and what practices we should engage in to foster better opportunities for all.

Thus, the central question concerning the role of schools in encouraging the involvement of Hispanic families is not whether to intervene or not (Valdés 1996, p. 204) but rather, why and how we should intervene. As the families move “up North” in search for a mythical “better life,” their daily realities change and they find new and steeper challenges; thus, a decision to intervene depends upon our philosophical stance about two central issues: The ontological goal of humankind (Freire, 1982) and our definition of education (Valdés 1996, p. 204) and its function in human life.

Freire (1982) asserted that humanity’s ontological vocation comprises that of learning, questioning, and taking on challenges conducive to a life in accordance with that human nature. Thus, humans are always searching and that search is enabled by education while, at the same time, it enhances education (p. 28-33). Critical education, such as Freire proposed, facilitates awareness of the world at large and of the particular situations of inequality in which we are immersed, a first step to survival and to enabling better living conditions for ourselves and for those around us.

Thus, the education of Hispanic children, as that of all children, ought to focus on the child’s interests, abilities, potentials, and needs in view of the goals of the child and the family as well as the demands that society imposes on the child. So conceived, education should respond to concrete socio-historical and economic characteristics of the immediate milieu in which the child interacts, encouraging the child to question, to explore, and to find answers on his or her own. Because education ought to be a holistic, collective endeavor, all significant adults should work together, focusing on the child, yet at the same time, searching for personal and group learning. Working together is not easy, especially when schools and families do not share a common language and cultural background; however, learning to interact, to talk, to listen, and

to negotiate would benefit all parties involved, individually, as well as strengthening the community. Therefore, in order to improve learning opportunities for the children, I argue for communication practices that facilitate mutual learning over resistance and obligation, understanding over mythological explanations of phenomena, and negotiation over imposition.

As Hispanics attempt to gain our own space in American society, we bring learned behaviors, beliefs, and mores that allowed us to survive in our countries of origin. Moving into a new society, we struggle to learn and understand the codes and rules of those we live among. Not learning means to become stagnant. Shielding us from learning alienates as surely as imposing beliefs and values upon us. Learning provides better opportunities for responsible decision-making. Because learning is complex in that it involves the entirety of a human being, it is necessary to learn in interaction with others, sharing and understanding each other's experiences. Given these beliefs, I question Valdés' (1996) critique of any parental involvement effort by schools.

Valdés (1996) claimed that, because the parents valued education and saw their roles as separate from the duties and responsibilities of the school, they contributed to building the character of the child through *consejos* (advice) and constant reminders of *respeto* towards adults and authorities. *Respeto*, she argued, is closely tied to *educación* and encompasses a wider connotation of respect and education than those terms hold in U. S. American culture. Therefore, in Valdés's study the parents viewed their socialization role as perpetuating their home culture, with little possibilities to acculturate to their new American culture. An alternative interpretation to Valdés's claims is that these parents were concerned about the future of their children and their adjustment to society, but attempted to reinforce goals valued in their home

culture because the parents were not aware of the requirements and demands the new culture would place on the children.

The education of Hispanic children, as it currently plays out in U.S. schools, is not a fair game, and is often not a game at all. A fair game entails goals, strategies, and rules known by all players. When schools, homes, and communities do not make concerted efforts to establish goals for the children, to learn or negotiate the rules, to share information about the child and learn together, all parties engage in non-cooperative games or in no game at all. Educating Hispanic children in American schools is a serious matter requiring careful thinking and policy. At this time, there is no apparent game to address the needs and characteristics of the children, whose academic needs extend from learning English to learning *in English* in a culture that is both, different and, many times, scary, threatening, and incomprehensible. The game must be initiated, and for these children, families, and schools there must be a realistic payoff. The game must employ strategies that allow all players to communicate and to benefit from their mutual exchanges.

In the next chapter, we will meet the players at Hope Elementary and will learn about some of the resources and limitations they encounter to play the game of parental involvement.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PLAYERS

*(The) mission of [Hope] Elementary School is to provide an appropriate curriculum and a supportive environment in which all students can become life-long learners while valuing themselves and others* (Report of the External Visitation Team, November 2001, p. 7).

A six-foot-four man pulls his hands out of the pockets of his leather jacket as he reaches down to the tiny girl hugging him around his knees. He pats her head, and the little girl walks towards a woman in a heavy coat, who reaches down to hug her. More bundled children get off the bus and imitate the little girl as the two adults return their greetings. “Good morning, Mr. Martin. Good morning, Mrs. Thomas,” I say as I walk quickly past, the uninviting, cold morning forcing me to hurry into the building. “Good morning, Carmen,” they reply.

As I push open the glass door, I wonder what the new tie on the school’s mural in the front lobby will be today. “Hope is a great place to be” “*Hope, el lugar perfecto para estar,*” reads the sign above pictures of small children of several races, one wearing a helmet, others sitting in a wheelchair or standing by an ABC easel. On the left, the picture of a tall man wearing a necktie, with the grin of a child who knows that candy is on its way, ducks down next to a little boy. Every day, mysterious little hands place a newly designed paper necktie on the mural.

I remember Mr. Martin’s surprise several months earlier when I asked if he had seen the mural. “That’s embarrassing. They painted my picture on it!” I just smiled, thinking that it was



a well-deserved tribute to a man committed to facilitating learning for the students and creating a positive work environment for the faculty.

Mr. Martin is a European-American man one year short of retirement. He was a middle school principal before moving to Hope Elementary three years ago, “Because I enjoy the little ones,” he shared at my job interview. Mr. Martin’s efforts focus on facilitating a good work climate for the staff and a safe learning environment for the children. “I do not see the children as Hispanic, Black, or White. To me, they are all children, and I try to be fair and serve them according to their needs,” said Mr. Martin at our first face-validity meeting. His demands and supervision of the staff concerning schedule, planning, and performing their duties are minimal as he trusts his staff to be responsible and ethical professionals, a trust which impels me to feel even more responsible for the children and the school. Mr. Martin deals with conflict in a non-confrontational manner, always giving people “a way out.”

The assistant principal, Mrs. Thomas, is the most conspicuous representative of the administration in the children’s educational plans, as she frequently monitors their progress in my class and is concerned with understanding their personal and emotional progress. She praises the children about their achievement as she sees them in the hallways and at extracurricular activities, and has made important administrative decisions to address their needs in several ways, such as scheduling and monitoring grade-level meetings during common planning time, in which the ESOL teachers are, for the first time, included. When she confides that both she and her mother have been English language learners, I better understand her empathy and advocacy toward ESOL children. “As a second language learner myself, I can attest to the fact that language acquisition takes time,” said Mrs. Thomas at our face-validity meeting (Lather, 1986).

Mrs. Thomas values team work. She understands the need for the staff to work in close relationship with the families. Mrs. Thomas is the shoulder upon which many teachers lean when the pressures of the job generate frustration or uncertainty.

Because I am the ESOL teacher of third-grade students, I am part of the third-grade academic team, comprising eight European American women, the administrators and, at least in one case, a bilingual tutor. I invite the teachers to become part of the research team but they decline to participate due to their family and work responsibilities. Three teachers, however, agree to participate by means of providing face validity on the written report: Mrs. Powell, Mrs. Turner, and Mrs. Greenwood. All teachers communicate about the children in the school (planning time, meetings, and in the halls), sharing in what I am learning about the children's lives. For some teachers, such exchanges of information provide an opportunity to indirectly become part of the research group, enabling them to modify the children's learning plans, while I become a bridge between teachers and families, a broker who translates and delivers messages to both interlocutors. Yet other teachers remain distant, resorting to me only to translate their messages, and evidencing hostility towards Hispanics. Nevertheless, the teachers in the team analyze the events surrounding the lives of children and families as well as the academic life of the school.

Mrs. Turner is a young European-American woman in her twenties. She is a caring, soft-spoken teacher who is concerned with providing every student with adequate learning opportunities. She encounters many barriers in her attempts to help some of her children, yet she does not give up and calls on the parents and me for help, inviting us to become part of the teaching team. Nevertheless, she feels a vacuum in her teaching preparation courses, as she learns about "the real world of teaching" with each passing day: Working with parents, poverty,

and child abuse are some of the issues that worry her. “I wish they had prepared me to deal with these kinds of situations,” said Mrs. Turner as we drove back from a home visit to one of the children we both taught (Field notes).

Mrs. Powell has been a teacher for more than ten years, yet she appears disconnected from the struggles of children at home, as she exercises no agency when I discuss some of the Latino children in her homeroom. As she provides me with the names and phone numbers of community organizations that could help the families, I perceive an attitude that appears to say, “If you learn about it (a problem,) you take care of it,” when it comes to triad interactions (Coleman, 1998).

Like Mrs. Turner, Mrs. Greenwood is a first-year elementary teacher. She is frequently worried about the students and apprehensive about meeting the requirements of her teaching position. I perceive her as willing to meet the needs of all of her students, although anxious about what she could provide to culturally and linguistically different children. Her class consists of twelve to fourteen children, six of whom come to my ESOL classes. At least two students exhibit severe behavioral problems in her classroom including frequent bullying behaviors toward peers. In addition, family difficulties arising from a child’s illness worry her throughout the year.

Because I have been a teacher in America for five years, I understand the psychological pressures of her job. Every year throughout the school year my ESOL teaching responsibilities shift unexpectedly, and I am required to perform many clerical duties (filing, making statistical reports, searching for information in the students’ permanent records, data entry) and to plan and carry out school-wide activities to “involve” parents, coordinating large group meetings, guest speakers, and workshops. In addition, I must serve between sixty and sixty-six students a day, in

groups that average ten students during six fifty-minute class periods a day. I also perform morning duties every other week (i.e. monitoring the hallway and language-brokering for Spanish-speaking parents and the school); participate in school committees and meetings on the children I serve, translate at meetings with parents, help with written translations (letters, forms), which I usually do as I eat my lunch, and assist with telephone calls (although the last year I worked at Hope Elementary, the school district hired a parent liaison to help with translation and calls). After two years of asking for a planning period for ESOL teachers, we finally obtained that right. Planning allows us to participate in grade-level meetings and to keep up with important information about our students and about grade-level activities. I spend some of my planning time at meetings about the students I serve. My planning time allows me to sometimes assess the students' work and grade it, while I plan my lessons at home.<sup>9</sup> I also use planning time to photocopy tests, materials, and practice exercises for my classes.

I am charged with additional responsibilities "on the go," as schools across the district feel the pressure of having to prepare "urgent" reports and paperwork with two-to-three days' notice. I perform menial tasks such as cleaning and organizing my room after school hours, sometimes on Saturdays and even on Sundays.

The teaching profession is currently under scrutiny, much to the dismay of certain critics and parents (Eberwein, 1999; Landau, 1999; transcript of parent meeting, 12/1/01) who see this as an unfair expectation due to the complexity of the game of learning and schooling in which

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<sup>9</sup> A belief commonly held by non-ESOL teachers is that the teaching of ESOL requires one to "write only one lesson plan per day." Hope Elementary encouraged a sheltered English approach (Uhl & Chamot, 1994; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000) in the ESOL classroom, using modified instruction to develop language and deliver the state mandated core curriculum, and thus, I wrote separate lesson plans for each class segment, focusing on the class from which the students were pulled (e.g., math, guided reading, social studies, writing).

individual, school, social, and political variables play a role. Education in America aims at “the construction of a new type of citizen” (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 3) who is autonomous, entrepreneurial, patriotic, exercising of self-reflectivity and self-control, and a “contribut(or) to collective social projects” (p. 7.) Teachers are charged with “governing the dispositions, sensitivities and capacities of the child [thus, their roles are to] function(s) as a [social] redemptive agent” (p. 2). Such an expectation ignores what Cohen, Higgins, & Ambrose (1999) called the “Social Arena” in which the child interacts: “Students are not inert units of production slotted into a classroom assembly line. They participate in dynamic, interdependent classroom and community social systems. Disturbing societal forces undermine students’ academic performance and make teaching more difficult” (p. 127-128).

Teachers in public schools are overwhelmed, divided between teaching the students and extra responsibilities that increase by the year (Cohen, Higgins, & Ambrose, 1999; Cuthbertson, 2002). In a society that values democracy and justice, education should model a problem-posing approach, and the role of teachers ought to shift from the current mandate to administrate pre-packaged curricula (Freire, 1998a), to that of a facilitator of higher thinking processes. As Popkewitz pointed out, education in the USA is an exercise of power in that all the actors in the process must submit to a larger authority that seeks to “*socially administer*” the construction of individual freedom (p. 3, emphasis added.) Thus, teachers must encourage independent and critical thinking and problem-solving in the students while they are denied their own opportunities to oppose practices that disallow their rights as citizens and workers to fair treatment and adequate conditions to perform their jobs (Cohen et al. 1999; Cuthbertson 2002, Freire 1998a, field notes May 28.) Such oppressive practices construct the identity of teachers and situate them as players (or not) in the game of schooling and parental involvement.

As with most of the teachers with whom I worked that year, Mrs. Greenwood and I met informally to discuss, assess, and serve English language learners (ELLs). She helped with my questions and class modifications, necessitated by last-minute county requirements for ESOL teachers. In turn, she asked for my advice and help several times during the year, calling parents, translating at her meetings with the parents, helping with planning for testing modifications. Because she had no previous experience in working with ELLs, she was concerned about her cultural awareness and readiness to work with culturally diverse children: “I cannot understand people from other cultures. I am sorry. I can’t. Many times I cannot even understand what you’re saying,” she told me during our end-of-the-year lunch (Field notes, May 7). Mrs. Thomas also stated, “I have heard several staff members say they don’t understand the accent/dialect of non-native English speakers. Lack of exposure to them, I guess.” (Face validity meeting) Her comments reinforce my argument about language and communication as central to the players’ willingness to participate in the game of schooling, which in turn is aggravated by differences in cultural practices and views of the world.

The literature shows several examples and concerns about a need to include college courses in teachers’ programs that will help them understand and work with culturally diverse families (Allestaht-Snyder and Schwartz, 2001; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, and Lopez, 1997). The first-year teachers were concerned that they had had no such opportunities.

All third-grade teachers engaged in frequent communication about the children. Because they held daily communication as the group, I named them the Teacher Team. I found the Teacher Team holding what I call informal meetings during children’s bathroom breaks, as the students lined up to wait for their turn to wash their hands, or when coming back from special activities or recess. Such windows of time allowed for the exchange of information and

negotiation of concerns, advice, and agreements to provide mutual help. Although the grade-level was technically divided into two teams, the whole group of teachers listened to and supported each other in times of crisis.

Because my classroom was in a portable about 150 feet away from the nearest third-grade classroom, it was difficult for me to participate often in these informal meetings; however, I managed to stay around sometimes and listen. When it was not possible for me to stay, the teachers kept me informed when their discussions had to do with the children I served.

Two Spanish-speaking staff members alternated their weekly morning duty at the front lobby with me, ensuring language-brokering to the parents who dropped by in the mornings. I had many opportunities to witness parent-school interactions during the weeks in which I performed my morning duty or when I casually walked by the office before and after classes, or during my planning period. Such windows of time also allowed interactions with the administrators as we attempted to enhance an accepting environment for the children and their families. In retrospect, I also see that such casual interactions secured the administrators' support for my efforts to work with the parents of the students I served. That support was beyond my expectations, as they graciously facilitated my access to the school building during after-school hours and to site documents that expanded my understanding of the events that took place in the school. Interacting with both the principal and assistant principal enhanced my understanding of institutional and political forces that shape decision-making in American schools.

### *The Invisible Players: The Families*

The parents provided information in several ways, writing at meetings (i.e., response to writing prompts such as “tell me about your child,” responses to readings, evaluations of

meetings and workshops); drawings (family coat-of-arms); journaling, participating in discussions at large group meetings (which I taped and transcribed within a week of every meeting); interviews, and through a survey. The group relied on the transcripts to reflect about our experiences and to analyze crucial points in our daily lives, especially as related to our interactions with the children and with the school.

From the beginning of our meetings, I encouraged the parents to write about any topic they wanted to explore in their lives that puzzled or worried them. In the large group, the parents appeared uncomfortable sharing their writings. I gave them a passage from my own journal about my upbringing. Upon reading it, the parents worked in small groups to talk about the journal. The groups drew on their own experiences to express their views about raising children and reported their conclusions to the large group.

Through the remainder of the year, a few parents chose to write their journals in preparation for the meetings while some others verbally shared their views about each topic with the large group. The parents wrote and interacted in Spanish. At one-on-one meetings and telephone conversations, the parents privately suggested topics to discuss in the large meetings, specifically, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual education, helping their child with mathematics homework, and school/home relationships. Freire (1982) described a methodological approach to literacy in which a multi-disciplinary research team engaged in participant observation in a community. They sought to collect information and find topics, or *generative themes* to guide the literacy process for the learners (p. 108-109). These teams analyzed community meeting transcripts as well as the researchers' own journals and notes, and met to discuss their observations with other team members and with interested community members. Following a problem-posing approach, they categorized the topics as essential and



auxiliary codifications, and searched for basic themes to develop a working agenda with the community. In contrast, a team of researchers was not available for the participatory action research that I report in this dissertation, and the group of co-researchers drew on their own interpretations of specific topics and experiences to engage in dialogues and expand their understanding of the specific problems they faced in the education of their children. I chose the main topic for the research based on my experiences as a second language learner and as a teacher of both English as a second language and Spanish as a foreign language, and the parents voluntarily joined my search. The focus of the group was on learning how to help their children with homework, yet, as we engaged in dialogic exchanges, the parents realized the intersection between past and present home experiences and schooling, and engaged in exploratory dialogues such as those described in chapter 5.

The first meetings aimed at breaking the ice as the group read the Spanish version of James Agreey's "Parable of the Eagle" (James & Jongeward, 1996) and wrote about their children. In this parable, Agreey describes how, with the help of an expert, a farmer learned that a bird, which he initially took for and raised as a chicken, was really an eagle.

The parents interpreted the parable, citing the teacher as the expert, the knowledgeable person, and the child as the eaglet. When I asked them who the farmer was, they quickly pointed out that this figure represented the parents, but they began to hesitate on their interpretation when I asked them about the chicken in the story. Through dialogical exchanges within the group they realized that they hold a vast knowledge about their children that teachers can benefit from, and that education can serve a purpose of either liberation or domestication. Thus, as we talked about the parable, the parents began to see the important role they play in the academics and

education of their children, to review the role of education as domestication or enabling, and to ponder the need for dialogue and mutual learning between families, children, and schools.

At our second meeting, which we held a month later, I asked the parents to share information about their child which they thought could help me to engage in meaningful learning interactions with the student. The responses from the parents provided insight about the children and families, as well as about parental goals and expectations of the child, revealing also their views and values about education. In the analysis that follows in this and subsequent chapters, I have textually quoted the parents' oral and written comments. Faithful to scholarship ethics and traditions, I am using academic conventions, italicizing the parents' words. Equally, their journal entries are transcribed with no editing, just as the parents wrote them. Results of the survey follow.

Family composition and living arrangement. The majority of parents who responded to the survey are 31 years or older; almost one third of the mothers are younger than 31 (see table 2)

Table 2. Age of parents.

Age of parents	Father <sup>a</sup>		Mother	
21 – 30	n = 0	0	n = 4	30.8
31 or more	n = 12	92.3	n = 9	69.2

Note. <sup>a</sup>One of the families is a single-mother-family; therefore the category “age of the father” does not apply in this case.

Survey results shown on table 3 indicate that most children live with both parents and siblings in nuclear family settings (i.e., parents and children only). Thirty percent of the families share their homes with at least one more person, including extended family and friends.

Table 3. Family composition and living arrangement

Living arrangement		
Nuclear (2-parent & siblings)	n = 9	69.2
Extended (2 parents & relatives)	n = 3	23.1
Single parent & family friend	n = 1	7.7

Guadalupe Valdés argued that, for Latino families, the extended family provides emotional and economic support as well as resources to better the education of the children:

For those families who had networks of extended family in place... there was a repository of what I call the “family’s collective wisdom” that was available to guide them in making a living, staying healthy, getting housing, and using existing systems. Few important decisions were made in these families without wide discussion and without consulting the senior “authority” in the family... This individual would generally have access to other sources of information, such as employers *who knew the system well and who could be trusted*. (1991, p. 95, emphasis added)

Accordingly, we could expect those families in the research group who live with extended family to have support networks that might enable them to navigate the system and to enhance achievement (see chapter 5).

Formal Education of Parents. Table 4 shows the results about the education of the parents who responded to this survey. The highest educational level attained by both parents is vocational / technical school (14 years of schooling), although the majority of the parents have not finished high school (46% of fathers and 38% of mothers).

Table 4. Educational Level of the Parents

Education	Father		Mother	
Elementary – Incomplete	n = 0	0	n = 1	7.7
Elementary – Complete	n = 3	23.0	n = 3	23.0
Middle school – Incomplete	n = 0	0	n = 1	7.7
High school – Incomplete	n = 3	23.0	n = 0	0
High school – Complete	n = 3	23.0	n = 3	23.0
Vocational / technical	n = 2	15.4	n = 1	7.7
No answer	n = 1	7.7	n = 4	30.8

On average, the educational level of the fathers is slightly higher than that of the mothers, as 38.4% of the parents finished high school (23%) or vocational or technical school (15.4%), while only 30.7% of the mothers finished high school (23%) or vocational or technical school (7.7%). Thus, the mothers exhibited greater numbers at the lowest educational levels (38.4% total, of which 30.7% finished elementary school, 7.7 % of which started middle school, and 7.7% each started but did not finish elementary school). A significant percent of mothers did not answer the question (30.8%) versus 7.7% of the fathers who did not respond.

After their 1996 National Household Education Survey, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1998) concluded, “the proportion of children whose mothers or fathers are highly involved in their schools increases as their parents’ education level increases” (p. 2). If such results apply to Hispanics, the information collected from the research group should suggest that the parents will be likely to have little involvement in their children’s academic lives. However, the NCES report focuses on the “formal” aspect of education, ignoring the role of informal education and lifelong learning, including cross-cultural learning,

facilitating awareness and enabling the learner to exercise advocacy for themselves and for their families. Concretely, the report does not account for other factors influencing such involvement, e.g., similarities or differences between the expectations of families and schools; brokerage and advocacy to negotiate, initiate, and play the game; knowledge of the rules to get involved; and knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as parents.

Family knowledge of English. This question relates to the ability of family members to understand, speak, read, and write in English. Several researchers have reported on the need for Hispanic families to resort to language brokers, usually family members (i.e., children and close relatives) to communicate with others in circumstances requiring the use of English. Parents who do not master English turn to others to interpret and translate others' speech to them (i.e., English to Spanish), or to translate for them (i.e., Spanish to English).

Table 5. Knowledge of English among family members

Knowledge of English	Speak(s)		Understand(s)		Read(s)	
Father only	n = 2	15.4	n = 1	7.7	n = 2	15.4
Father and child(ren)	n = 3	23.0	n = 3	23.0	n = 1	7.7
Mother and child(ren)	n = 1	7.7	n = 1	7.7	n = 1	7.7
Aunt, uncle	n = 1	7.7	n = 1	7.7	n = 1	7.7
Child and cousin			n = 1	7.7		
Child(ren)	n = 2	15.4	n = 2	15.4	n = 4	30.8
No one in family	n = 4	30.8	n = 4	30.8	n = 4	30.8

Making inferences from the survey response to this question (see table 5), I would expect that the majority of families will rely on their children to assist them in their interactions in English (15.4% each for oral interpretation and translation and 30.8% for reading), or on parents'

siblings or nephews (7.7% to translate for them; 14.4% to translate to them, and 7.7% to read to them). Almost one-third of the families (30.8%) do not have family members to translate or interpret for them. Less than half of the families (46.1%) reported that either parent speaks English (38.4% of fathers and 7.7% of mothers), 38.4% that either understands it (30.7% fathers and 7.7% mothers) and 30.8% that either reads it (23.1% fathers and 7.7% mothers)

Concha Delgado-Gaitán (1990) indicated that linguistic differences are “an obstacle for limited-English-speaking parents and (are) held as a major source of student academic failure and the inability of parents to assist their children at home” (p. 1). In addition, when families and schools do not share a common code (language) and a channel (i.e., relying on children to deliver communications), power and control shifts over to the children, altering what Valdés (1996) termed the “delicate balance (of Hispanic) families.” This author argued that as children become more proficient in English and their parents lag behind, language becomes a tool for control and power to manipulate their parents “Often the fact that English quickly became a secret language for the children became a problem for the family” (p. 136).

Language extends beyond home/school communications to affect everyday interactions and customs within the family. Grolnick and Ryan (1989) contended that families who are successful at supporting achievement provide the children with structure, support their autonomy, and exercise control over their lives in an authoritative way. Authoritative parents must be knowledgeable and able to communicate expectations, mores, and values to the children. They exercise control by monitoring the child’s activities and friends, all of which is facilitated by interacting in a common language with children, friends, and other significant adults in the child’s lives. Therefore, for Hispanic families who do not share a common mainstream code with their children, the task of raising them becomes extremely challenging (Rodriguez, 1987).

Epstein (2001) stated that student achievement and home/school collaborations depend on three forces: history, student variables, and home/school practices within a cultural framework. The inclusion of student variables points at two important factors to consider when examining autonomy support (and parenting): the age and grade level of the students. Therefore, parents of high achievers support the acquisition of autonomy in a graded, progressive fashion as the child grows older and attends higher grade-levels.

In summary, some factors co-related with school achievement are communication (of parents and students) with teachers and daily interactions between parents and children, based on school matters (Coleman, 1998, Deslandes et al., 1997). When parents rely on the child as a channel to interact with their immediate world, an important component in parent-child relationships for Hispanic families is at stake: The parental ability to maintain control over the lives of the children, to discipline them, and to be able to *progressively* support their acquisition of autonomy (Grolnick and Ryan, 1989. See also Inger, 1992; Walsh, 1991.) This suggests that Hispanic families' capacity to maintain their balance is challenged when their ability to maintain communication is altered. In addition, required to interact in a system with values and regulations they are unaware of, the parents become easy targets for threats to report them to the local authorities when they do attempt to exercise their roles as disciplinarians and authority figures in their home (see chapter 6).

Occupation. Table 6 shows the distribution of jobs held by the parent group. The majority of the surveyed parents work in construction and poultry. Other occupations for men include cab driver, line worker (industry), and welder, while most women reported themselves to be homemakers or workers in the food service industry. Twenty-three percent of those surveyed did not answer this question in both groups (fathers and mothers).

Table 6. Occupation.

Occupation	Father		Mother	
Construction	n = 4	30.7		
Cab driver	n = 1	7.7		
Poultry	n = 3	23.1	n = 3	23.1
Line worker	n = 1	7.7		
Welding	n = 1	7.7		
Homemaker			n = 6	46.1
Food Services			n = 1	7.7
No answer	n = 3	23.1	n = 3	23.1

In chapter 5, a small group of mothers discuss some of the major changes in their living situations after moving to the United States. In their countries of origin, the mothers raised children at home, while the father was the main provider for the family. Families spent more time together and the mothers established frequent informal contacts with the schools. As their lifestyles changed in the United States and both parents were required to work to fulfill their economic responsibilities, the opportunities to get “involved” in the school diminished (Inger, 1992; Valdés, 1996), as did the possibilities to spend time together.

Home/School Interactions in Country of Origin. Registering the child in school was the most common reason for parents to interact with their child’s school in their countries of origin (23.5%). Several parents (11.8%) reported that they interacted with teachers (e.g., shopping for festivals), learned about the child’s behavior and academic progress (grades) (17.6%) or participated in school events such as festivals, food festivals, parent-teacher meetings, and



school-cleaning activities (11.8%). Several families (11.8%) reported that their children were born in the U.S. (table 7).

Table 7. Reasons for Home-School interactions in countries of origin

Reasons		
Register child in school	n = 4	23.5
Learn about behavior and grades	n = 3	17.6
Interact with teachers.	n = 2	11.8
Participate in school events	n = 2	11.8
No answer	n = 4	23.5
Does not apply.	n = 2	11.8

The parents' responses to this question indicate their interest in supporting the school and the child while in their countries of origin, and that their "participation" does not differ much from some expectations by schools in America, where peripheral participation in fundraising activities and aiding teachers constitutes the core of what parents are encouraged or allowed to do.

The parents were interested in the academic learning of the children *and* in their behavior in the school; yet, as I later found out, many parents in the group did not understand the grading system or the school's expectations for 'acceptable' social behaviors of the children in the U.S.A. Again, a limited or non-existent proficiency in English, coupled with a lack of familiarity with the rules of the school, made it necessary for the parents to rely on third parties to understand the progress of their child. Therefore, in spite of my initial critique of those who claim that Hispanic parents lack knowledge and skills to support the education of their children in American schools, I found some truth in this analysis. In the following chapters, I will show

that both parents and the school lack skills to interact with each other, to communicate clearly and to initiate and sustain relationships to benefit all of those involved in the educational process.

Goals and expectations. Table 8 shows a summary of the goals and expectations of the parents. The participants indicated a variety of personal goals and expectations for their future, including learning English (oral and written, 46.2%) and taking advantage of the opportunities the country gives them, in order to both help their children to study and become professionals in any area they choose (38.5%), and to work and support/help their families (15.3%).

Table 8. Goals and Expectations

Goals & Expectations		
To learn English	n = 6	46.2
To be able to take advantage of opportunities in U.S.A. to help child.	n = 5	38.5
To work and help family	n = 2	15.3

When asked about their expectations for the future of their children, all parents (100%) want for their child to be successful in school and society, which includes being a good person, helping others, and being good citizens (see table 9). Such goals Valdés (1996) also found among the parents in her study. A common goal among the parents is that of a “better life” for the children, which they envision as having less strenuous jobs as those the parents presently hold, and being able to work for a better pay (53.3%.) Two parents (15.3%) hold more immediate goals for their children, wanting them to learn to read in English and “to do their daily homework, take a bath, eat dinner, and go to bed to get ready for the next day.”

Table 9. Goals and Expectations of the Children.

Expectations of Children		
To be successful in school & society	n = 13	100.00
To have a better life	n = 7	53.0
To develop good habits	n = 1	15.3

Parental involvement, at least from an institutional (i.e., nation and state) perspective, appears to consist of parents becoming part of the teaching team through participation in school activities and/or providing adequate learning environments at home. The purpose of such involvement is to enhance the academic achievement of the children, in what Vincent (1996) terms “a *supporter/learner* model” (p. 148). However, the school system is geared towards immediate-term goals (test scores) while the parents envisioned long-term goals for the children, as shown by their responses to this question.

Parental perception of factors that influence academic achievement. More than one half of the surveyed parents (55%) believed that parents play a role in the child’s achievement and that they do so in direct ways such as helping the child with homework and reading, spending time together, holding high expectations and encouraging the children. Their responses include as well the ability to establish good relationships with the children. Twenty percent of the parents believed that certain specific traits, discipline, organization/order, academic abilities and personal goals of the child are also important to achievement, as is teacher’s help (5%) and knowledge of the language used in school (i.e., English, 10%).

Table 10. Parents' perception of factors that influence academic achievement

Factors		
Parental traits and support	n = 11	55.0
Student traits	n = 4	20.0
Help from teachers	n = 1	5.0
Language	n = 2	10.0
Unrelated answer	n = 2	10.0

The range of responses reveals that these parents place responsibility on themselves and their children when it comes to academic achievement, and that they believe several factors influence how children fare in learning. Interestingly, although the parents referred to the child's knowledge of English as a barrier to academic learning in the U.S.A. (i.e., question # 15), just two parents (10%) included this factor in their response to this question (one of the responses referred to the parent's inability to help child with homework, due to a lack of knowledge of English by the parent), and only one (5%) acknowledged that teachers do have a role in this regard.

Parental perceptions of children's traits for academic success. The parents believed that both extrinsic and intrinsic factors impact academic success. Extrinsic factors are related to parental roles such as helping with homework, supervising the children, learning together and modeling, giving advice or *consejos* and trusting/encouraging the child (33.3%). Intrinsic, or individual traits include motivation (19%); discipline, sacrifice, and perseverance (14.3); curiosity (9.5%); obedience/ability to follow directions (9.5%); intelligence; children's academic needs; and (children's) knowledge of English (4.8% each).

Table 11. Children's traits for academic success according to the parents

Trait		
Motivation	n = 4	19.7
Discipline, sacrifice, and perseverance	n = 3	14.3
Curiosity	n = 2	9.5
Following directions, obedience	n = 2	9.5
Intelligence	n = 1	4.8
Children's needs (to read and write)	n = 1	4.8
Children's knowledge of English	n = 1	4.8
Parental encouragement, trust, and advice	n = 7	33.3

The possibilities of a child's achievement for the parents in this survey did not appear confined to intelligence or the so-called natural abilities<sup>10</sup> (Valdés, 1996); they appeared to believe that children can achieve when both intrinsic and extrinsic factors are available to the children. Table 11 shows some of the basic beliefs of the surveyed parents about learning, about the child, schooling, and parenting that they expressed in their answers to this and the preceding question.

How do parents support academics at home? The parents provided more than one answer to this question, revealing that 22.8% help their children with homework; 14.3% learn with the child and model an interest for learning by attending English classes and school meetings and

<sup>10</sup> The parents in Valdés's study reportedly categorized their children as having a natural ability to learn academics or to have other dispositions towards learning such as being skillful at learning a trade. The term "machetero" in her study refers to students who spend a long time grasping academic concepts and procedures, thus, studying longer and harder than those endowed with natural abilities to learning (p. 132, 133)

discussing the parent's working conditions (López 2001) (see table 12). Some parents stated that they give advice, talk with the child (11.4% each), supervise and provide a homework structure at home, including a daily routine and tranquil (peaceful) environment and/or communicate their expectations of the child (3.8% each). Two parents (8.6%) played with the child to learn together and an equal percentage said that they trust the child, are friends with him or her, and answer his or her questions, although their responses were not specific about what they do trust their children about, how they show such a friendship, or what kind of questions do they answer.

Table 12. Academic support in the child's home

Manner of support		
Helping with homework	n = 7	22.8
Learning together, modeling	n = 5	14.3
Giving advice	n = 4	11.4
Supervising	n = 3	8.6
Talking / communicating	n = 3	11.4
Playing	n = 3	8.6
Home structure (routines, environment)	n = 3	8.6
Communicating expectations, rules	n = 3	8.6
Relationships, trusting and friendship	n = 2	5.7

This question aimed at finding about some of the cultural capital with which the parents approach academic learning in U.S.A. schools and how they support their child's education. At least from a conceptual point of view, the respondents appeared to have a repertoire of strategies similar to those traits discussed in the parenting and achievement literature that I consulted in English (i.e., providing structure, supervising homework, rules and expectations of child), and

many still resorted to *consejos* (Valdés, 1994) as a parenting strategy to support the child. By positioning themselves as equal partners in learning with the child (i.e., modeling), some parents also encouraged valuation of and lifelong learning. The language issue, though not recognized by many of the parents, continues to emerge as a factor in child-parent interactions.

Resources. The parents considered themselves among the main resources to support learning at home (24%). Sixteen percent resort to their oldest child to help their third-grader with school-related work, while others relied extended family (8%) or other adults (4%).

Among material resources, the parents cited using dictionaries (24%), books (20%), and library visits (4%). Thus, the parents in the surveyed group incorporated both human and material resources to support academic learning at home, and their use of human resources (networks, in Valdés's words) appeared connected to availability, giving preference to nuclear family (i.e., parents and siblings) over extended family and non-related adults.

Table 13. Resources available at home.

Type of resource		
Support from parents	n = 6	24
Help from older siblings	n = 4	16
Help from extended family	n = 2	8
Help from other adults / non family	n = 1	4
Dictionary	n = 6	24
Books	n = 5	20
Community resources (library)	n = 1	7.7

The high number of parents who reported the use of dictionaries could be connected to an early discussion at the start of the meetings where the parents shared tips and ideas about their

home practices to encourage learning, and our subsequent drill on how to use the dictionary, which we addressed in our meeting number four (the parent survey was conducted after meeting number six, after the university approved this research). The practices of using books and dictionaries as well as using the library increased among the parents toward the end of the data-collection period with the large group, as I documented in my research journals.

Parents' families (early) influences on their education. The survey responses to this question are congruent with answers to previous questions about personal traits of the students, parental support of achievement, and use of resources; in addition, several respondents provided more than one trait in their answer. Interestingly, these traits are similar to those reported in the previous sections as parental responsibilities towards the children.

Table 14. Early influences of families in the education of parents

Manner of influence		
Encouraging attendance	n = 5	25
Educación and respeto	n = 3	15
Consejos (advice)	n = 3	15
Motivating & revising homework	n = 2	10
Attending school events	n = 1	5
Dialogues / conversations	n = 1	5
Re-directing attention	n = 1	5
Love	n = 1	5
Providing opportunities to pursue studies	n = 1	5
No influence	n = 1	5
No answer	n = 1	5



Two distinct traits already discussed in the literature about Hispanics, *respeto* and *educación* (Valdés, 1996), were cited by 15% of the parents as qualities they learned from their parents at home. They also mentioned that their parents encouraged them to attend school (25%), gave them *consejos* (15.0%), motivated them and revised homework (10%). Other ways their parents showed support were by attending school-related events, establishing conversations with the children, re-directing attention, giving love, and providing them with opportunities to pursue their studies (i.e., economic support) (5% each.). One parent (5%) reported growing up without his/her parents, and one parent did not answer the question (5%).

Helping child with homework. In this question the parents were asked to describe a specific event in which their child asked for their help with homework. More than one third of the surveyed parents pointed at language difficulties that interfered with their ability to support the child with their homework (38.5%). Some parents addressed the problem by helping the child in Spanish, “*Cuando mi hijo me pidio ayuda me sente y le explique, solo que yo en espanol y el lo traduje Ingle*” [When my child asked for my help, I sat down and explained to him in Spanish, and he translated it into English]. Using the dictionary was also cited, although the parent reported some communication difficulties “... *a beses puedo ayudarla y abeses no porque compre un disionario y abeses no puedo porque no entiendo muy bien lo que ella me quiere decir.*” [Sometimes I am able to help her and sometimes I can’t because I bought a dictionary (that helps the parent to help the child) and sometimes I cannot (help the child) because I do not understand what she is telling me.] Another parent pointed at the difficulty of finding the time to help, i.e., necessary household chores interfered (7.7%), while others focused on the emotional impact that homework has on both child and adult. When the parent is able to help, the child expresses joy and self-sufficiency “*A el le dio mucho gusto y le dio mas confianza en pedir*

*ayuda a nosotros (y) a su hermano*” [He was excited and felt more confident about asking for our help and that of his brother.] When unable to help their children, parents reported a feeling of sadness and inadequacy about themselves, “*Me pidió que la ayudara y le respondí que yo tampoco sabía ese día me sentí tan mal por como le contesté.*” [She asked for my help and I told her that I didn’t know either. That day I felt so bad about my answer.] Some other parents (7.7%) reported that, without parental help, the child had to learn to survive on his or her own.

Table 15. Helping children with homework

Factors		
Interference (parents’ chores)	1	7.7
English as a barrier	5	38.5
Helping in Spanish	1	7.7
Using dictionary	1	7.7
Child’s emotions: happiness, encouragement	2	15.4
Parent’s emotions: sadness	2	15.4
Sink or swim: Self-sufficient child	1	7.7

Swick and Graves (1993) discussed ecological theories of human development, concretely, how individuals develop talents and abilities that allow them to be more or less proactive in their relationship with others and with their environment. A central concept in such theories is that of *empowerment*, which develops as a result of the individual’s perceptions of and relationships with significant others, with the family assuming a fundamental role:

It is within the family ecology that children and parents develop their sense of power. Empowered parents (and an empowering family) have three enabling

characteristics: (1) ability to access and control needed resources, (2) ability to make decisions and solve problems, and (3) ability to interact effectively with others in the social exchange process (Dunst, Trivette, and Deal, 1988, p. 51).

School work and, more specifically, homework, can foster empowerment or disempowerment of the parents in their relationship with their children within the (socially constructed) authority structure of the family. In addition to language differences, the evolving nature of academic contents and methods influence such exchanges and impact how a child perceives his or her parents. If a child feels that the parents are helpful, that they can help the child solve problems, trust does not erode and the balance inside the family is more likely to be maintained with little impact on discipline, respect, or authority. On the other hand, if the child perceives the parent to be *deficient*, then the child can turn defiant, deviant, and thereby alters such family structure, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Parenting strategies to foster gratification delay. This question asked the parents to describe an event in which their child asked them to buy something for him or her, and the parent was not able to buy it. The responses on table 16 show some of the strategies parents use to encourage self-control and delay of gratification traits that predict emotional intelligence and that Goleman (1995) claimed is related to success in life.

Almost one half of the parents (46.1%) reported that the child does not ask parents to buy things for them, or that they have never been in a situation in which they couldn't get what they asked for. Almost half of the parents who reported having faced such a situation, (23% of the total), delayed the satisfaction of the child's request by offering it as a reward for academic achievement, transferring responsibility for earning the reward to the child. Other parents redirected the child's attention by offering to buy them something smaller (7.7%), or by

alternating purchases for all their children (7.7%), promising to satisfy this child's wants at a later date (7.7%), or by talking to the child and encouraging him/her to understand the parent's inability to satisfy the desire (7.7%).

Table 16. Strategies to foster the delay of gratification of children

Strategy		
Delaying and rewarding	3	23.0
Trading	1	7.7
Alternating between siblings	1	7.7
Promising	1	7.7
Talking	1	7.7
Not applicable	6	46.1

The use of a range of strategies suggests that parenting tactics among these parents are not defined solely by their cultural background. Their tactics appear individual, perhaps related to how they were reared in their paternal/maternal homes.

Table 17 summarizes parents' response to the question, ". . . please tell me, in as much detail as possible, what happened when your child wanted something you could not afford to buy?" The strategies described hinted at various models of parenting styles, including the authoritarian parent who demands or commands, the authoritative parent who discusses the task with the child, or whose child immediately complies, and the permissive parent whose child doesn't follow directions or mind the parent's requests.

In response to their parents' requests, the children behaved in several ways, complying with the parent's commands (23%), delaying their response to finally comply with the request on

their own (7.7%) or after the parent promises a reward (23%). A few children do not comply (7%) even if promised a reward (7%).

Table 17. Discipline: Strategy and Response.

Parent strategy	Child's behavior		
Parent commands	Complies	3	23
Parent asks	Does not comply	1	7.7
Parent orders/ insists upset	Does it after second attempt	1	7.7
Explains	Unknown	1	7.7
Says and promises reward	Does it	3	23.0
	Doesn't do it	1	7.7% ea
No specific answer		3	23.0

Helping child learn English. The parents use several strategies to help their child learn English, such as reading (31.6%), writing (1.75%) and learning with the child (26.3%) (see table 18).

The parents stated that they advised their child to read and write every day and that they encouraged them to do their work by sitting with the children as they do their homework. To many of them, knowing the basics of reading in English is sufficient to listen to their child read, thus assisting phonological development, along with an intrinsic development of the child's motivation and self-esteem, as stated by one of the participants in the pilot study (see appendix A.) The mother in the pilot study stated that she took on every opportunity to attend German classes at her child's school because "knowing how to read (German), even if I do not know what it means, I am able to help my child practice (reading) at home."

Table 18. How parents support learning of English

Type of support		
Reading	n = 6	31.5
Learning together	n = 3	15.7
Writing	n = 3	15.7
Cannot help child	n = 2	10.5
Playing	n = 1	5.3
Stays with child while s/he studies	n = 1	5.3
No answer	n = 2	10.5

Learning in a second language requires practice, and the mechanics of reading in English has been cited as one of the major difficulties for Hispanic parents as they engage in helping their children with homework. The experience of the participant in my pilot study, learning the pronunciation of German to help her child at home, could be extrapolated to Hispanic parents who face a similar challenge to that of the mother in the pilot study. Conversely, to address reading comprehension, the parents engaged in conversations about various types of texts (written, everyday experiences) as shown in chapter 7.

Learning with the child includes modeling and games/playing together. Only 10.5% of the parents stated that they were unable to assist the child in learning English. Therefore, the families in this research demonstrated a desire to help their children succeed in the school, in spite of their difficulties with the language, where 30% reported that none of the family is comfortable with their level of knowledge of English (see page 99).

Suggestions to improve home-school communication. The parents stated that they are used to large group meetings of the kind we conducted for this research, and that both American

schools and the schools in their countries of origin are concerned about the child's academic learning and with the development of self-discipline. When considering the differences between the two systems, they clarified that although both focus on academics, Hope Elementary helped them to acquire learning strategies, and that their children received more help from their teachers in the U.S.A. because the schools are more child-centered here. They also stated that the treatment of children and parents is better in U.S.A. schools. They pointed out linguistic differences in learning (i.e., English versus Spanish), methodological strategies (i.e., mechanical learning of vocabulary, filling out sheets with target words in Mexico) and the availability of better resources, including more teachers and school transportation, in the U.S.

Table 19. Suggestions to improve home-school interactions.

Suggestions		
Communication with teachers	n = 6	30
Triad interactions	n = 2	10
Parents visiting the school	n = 2	10
Phone calls	n = 2	10
Talking with other parents	n = 1	5
Learning about teacher's effectiveness	n = 1	5
Attending school events/large meetings	n = 1	5
No suggestions	n = 3	15
No answer	n = 2	10

Table 19 shows, the answers to this question are related to frequency of communications i.e., “*tener comunicación seguido con los maestros*” [having frequent communication with teachers] (30%); establishing connections and communication among triad members (10%)

(“*comunicandose mucho con los maestros los niños y los maestros con uno*” [to communicate a lot among teachers, parents and children]; “*es necesario hablar con los maestros y tratar de ayudarlos*” [It is necessary to talk with the teachers and that they help the children], as well as to the topic (discipline, behavior, and achievement), and manner of communication i.e., large parent meetings (5%), phone calls (10%), and visits to the school (10%). Only 10% of the parents discussed the need to learn about the teacher’s qualifications and effectiveness (5%) or to communicate with other parents about school-related matters. (5%)

In summary, the parents involved in this research held specific expectations of their children, especially as related to citizenship, have a variety of strategies for childrearing, and know their children’s abilities and ways. The expectations constituted their goals for the game of raising children, which they viewed as their parental responsibility. As for their goals concerning academic learning, the parents wanted their children to be successful professionals, yet for the most part, they seemed to view this a primary responsibility of the school, arguably, due to their own previous schooling experiences, as will be discussed in chapter 5. Although they were clear about the goals and expectations of their children (payoffs), and several of them possessed a cultural capital that was very much in line with expectations for school success, they were not aware of the rules to play the game of parental involvement in the school, as will be demonstrated in the next chapters.

Central to school success and lifelong achievement are previous experiences, among which, family life plays an important role. In the next chapter, a group of mothers examine their pre, during, and post-migration experiences to the U.S.A. As they share their journal entries and engage in dialogic exchanges, they uncover important myths affecting their lives and those of their children.



## CHAPTER 5

### “NI AUNQUE VOLVIERA A NACER ME REGRESO AL NORTE”

“I WOULDN’T GO BACK TO THE NORTH, EVEN IF I HAD A CHANCE TO LIVE MY  
LIFE OVER”

*“... my homeland is not the only geographic point I retain with much clarity in my memory, and that I can reproduce with my eyes closed. My homeland is, above all, a space in time that involves geography, history, culture. My homeland is also pain, hunger, misery. It is also the hope of millions who remain hungry for social justice”* (Paulo Freire, 2000, p. 39-40).

It is a few minutes after five in the afternoon, and I am taking a break from transcribing my last tape from a recent interview in Xalapa, Veracruz. Violeta, my hostess, her daughter Piedad and I are sitting around the table, sipping on coffee and eating *bolillo*, a delicious Mexican bread. A discrete knock on the back door prompts Piedad to get up and open it. Two women enter the dining room as they greet everyone, “*Buenas tardes.*” I stand up and greet them back. “*Mucho gusto, soy Carmen,*” I say. “*Mucho gusto. Soy Norma, y esta es mi mamá, Jovita,*” says the young woman, introducing herself and her mother. “*Somos las vecinas de Violeta. Vivimos en la planta de abajo,*” continues Norma, informing me that they are Violeta’s neighbors and they live on the first floor of the two-story house.

“I heard you came from the United States,” says Norma. “How is life up there?” I tell her about the striking differences between what I knew for a good part of my life as a native of Colombia, South America, and the North American Southeast: tranquility, peace, organization, opportunity, and the possibility to build a future. Norma is fascinated and invites me to visit her. Because I am two days short of returning to the U.S., I politely refuse her invitation, sharing that

I am in the midst of transcribing my last interview, and I will have to read it with my interviewee before I leave. Norma volunteers to give me an interview: “*Yo le doy una entrevista cuando usted quiera.*”

Regretting that the pressure of time prevents me from seizing the opportunity her kind offer provides, I thank her for her willingness to cooperate with me. Soon the conversation shifts back to life in the United States: “*Yo me voy a ir pronto,*” says Norma with a mix of pride and expectant anticipation of her upcoming trip to USA. “Oh, great! So you got the visa to go up there?” asks Violeta. “No,” replies Norma. “*Me voy de mojada.*” She was going to be smuggled in as a “wetback.” I am puzzled. Why does she want to be smuggled into the country? Can she not apply for a visa? Why risk her life and safety to cross the border? Anticipating my thoughts, Norma continues: “*Yo fui a la embajada para que me dieran la visa y me la negaron. Me gasté todos los ahorros que tenía y no me dieron la visa. Mi esposo está en los Estados Unidos y me está esperando, así que en vez de presentarme a la embajada para que me nieguen la visa otra vez, una persona me va a ayudar a irme.*” [I applied for a visa at the American Embassy and they denied it to me. I spent my savings, and they did not give me the visa. My husband, who lives in the United States, is waiting for me. This time, instead of going back to the embassy so that they will deny my visa one more time, someone is going to help me.]

It is commonly believed that most illegal immigrants evade immigration officials, crossing the border through the Rio Grande, the desert, or presenting other people’s documentation at the checkpoints in the border. Yet, journalist Jorge Ramos (2000) stated that “six out of 10 (undocumented immigrants) enter the United States as tourists, students, and business people and become ‘illegal’ when they ‘over stay their visas’” (p. 240). He also reported that legal immigrants greatly surpass the number of undocumented people in the

country, and that the percentage of immigration is lower now than at the beginning of the century. “What has changed,” he said, “is the country of origin of the immigrants” (p. 91. Translated from Spanish).

“¿No le da miedo?” [Aren’t you scared?] I ask, thinking about the many perils undocumented immigrants face throughout the journey. “*Me voy por avión hasta Miami, así que no tengo problema,*” says Norma as her big brown eyes spark with hope. She will travel by plane to Miami, and she is confident she will have no problems entering the country. “*Pero ¿cómo le vas a hacer para pasar inmigración?*” [How are you going to evade immigration?] asks Violeta, reminding us that everyone who enters the country will have to go through immigration. “*El Coyote me va a hacer pasar como su esposa, ya tiene los papeles arreglados,*” replies Norma. “*El Coyote,*” the smuggler. Norma will pass as his wife when he presents false marriage documents.

“¿No te da miedo que te violen?” [Aren’t you afraid that you might be raped?] asks Violeta again. Her words are a reminder of yet another of the perils illegal immigrants face. Reports on unsafe traveling conditions and violence facing illegal immigrants are thoroughly documented by local newspapers and authors such as Garrett, (2000) and Ramos (2000). Norma is too hopeful to weigh the risks, and I remain asking myself, to what extent have I contributed to feeding her dreams (Ferriss, 2002)? Because in my honest answer about life in the United States, I neglected to tell her two very important facts: that I came as a legal immigrant and I am now a U.S. citizen, and that I have had my share of the hardships it takes to get to where I am now. More than a year later, a group of women in a writing group would confirm my suspicion that disinformation about the perils and hardships of the journey to “the North,” as well as of the

living conditions most undocumented immigrants face in North America, is common in their countries of origin.

### *The Writing Group*

Scholars in the areas of multicultural education and social justice (Igoa, 1995, Nieto, 1992; Delpit, 1988), and socio-cultural and education theory (Moll et al., 1992, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978) have discussed the need to consider the learner as a totality, including his or her early experiences at home and specific traumatic situations in life. Nieto and Igoa suggest socio-political intricacies surrounding emigration from the children's home country, as well as the experience of migration itself, as important psychological aspects that compound a young learner's motivation to learn a second language, and the ability to learn in a second language (see also Ferriss, 2002; Garrett, 2000).

In this chapter I will examine private games, including what the families invest in the game of parental involvement. The analysis offers a window into the process of making sense of our lives and connecting our previous experiences with our historical present. Because I wrote, read, talked, laughed, cried, and thought out loud with the parents, the whole group became co-investigators in a Freirean sense, finding common grounds to link our experiences and to become emotional supporters of each other.

The writing group is composed of seven women, ages 28 to 54. Before we became part of the writing group, we did not know each other, except for occasional encounters during school meetings. At the time the group began to meet, six of them had children in the third grade in Hope Elementary, and all the children attended English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, which I taught.

The members of the group are Ana, Angelica, Ofelia, Sandra, Toña, Zunilda, and I. With the exception of Ana and José, all other names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. Information about the six women –excluding myself- is presented on table 20.

Table 20. Participants' Information

Participant / focal child	Occupation Country of origin / U.S.A.	Education	Children living w/ family	Family living arrangement	Husband's occupation	Home
Ana / Jose	Student / housewife  Business owner	2 years college	4	Two-parent	Poultry (two jobs)	Owners
Angelica / Carlos	Household in parents' home/ Housekeeping, clerical	Middle school	5	Two-parent	Sales	Owners
Ofelia / Juanita	Housewife/ Line worker	Elementary incomplete	5	Extended family	Laborer	Owners, rent to in-laws.
Sandra / Constanza	Poultry (line worker)	Technical	1	Extended family	Taxi cab driver	Rent from husband's brother.
Toña / Chavis	Housework and occasional babysitting	Elementary incomplete	2	Extended family	"When called" (Construction)	Homeless (performs household chores for a place to live)
Zunilda / Alex	Line worker (packaging)	Middle school	3	Extended family	Laborer	Owners (Rent to extended family)

At the initial stages of this research, I informed the group of parents of my interest in studying how Latino parents and teachers interact in American public schools, and how those interactions affect the academic lives of their children. I obtained their signed permission to

record our conversations and interviews, and to use their writings (in the form of journals, notes, and reflections) as part of my doctoral dissertation. We also agreed on their preferred pseudonyms for this written report.

At every meeting, we refocused on the goals the participants decided upon when the group began to form. My role in the group shifted from being an animator (Stoecker, 1997) and facilitator (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991; Lather & Smithies, 1997) to a participant and, at times, research assistant, in that I located and brought readings to the meetings that were connected with the group's discussions. Although a difficult task, I played at times devil's advocate when I presented the group with counterpoints to their assessments of problematic issues; such as myths about illegal immigration or concerns about their role in taxing social services in the U.S.A.

My role as a scribe, recording the group's thoughts and discussions, as well as their questions and answers to puzzling situations in their lives, never changed. I provided the group with materials to write about our lives (i.e., notebooks, paper, tape recorder, meeting transcripts, books, readers) and they responded with their friendship and eagerness to share their experiences and analysis with each other. Our focus was to offer a glimpse into what it is like to live in the United States as a Mexican immigrant (Colombian immigrant in my case) and what it takes to rear (and teach) children in a culture so different and so often incomprehensible, a culture that evades us, that slips from our hands like wet soap.

Therefore, this work is not mine alone. My graduation will be the product of our mutual effort. When I stand on the podium to receive my diploma, I will be representing the group as we will all have become symbolically, graduated researchers of our lives. Graduation is really a beginning, as people can never stop learning. Therein lies the beauty of our destiny as human beings. We are learners for life. Here are the stories of my co-investigators, and the subsequent

analysis they made in their attempts to make sense of parenting and schooling their children in America.

### *Learning as Discovery*

Ofelia rushes to open doors and windows while turning on the ceiling fan. “¿Están bien?” she asks, as she tries to make the room comfortable for the women sitting around the table in her dining room on this October afternoon<sup>11</sup>. “Yes, we are fine,” we reassure her. She grabs some glasses from the nearby kitchen, and pours fresh lemonade from a jar out of the refrigerator in the dining room. At age 37, Ofelia is thankful to life in general, and to God in particular. Despite a life of deprivation, mostly due to the early passing of her mother that led to abandonment by her father, shifting the responsibility for raising Ofelia and her sister onto her grandmother, Ofelia is happy to have a job now and to own a home. Despite little formal education (second grade), she is very knowledgeable on the uses of herbs for therapeutic purposes, and keeps her garden up-to-date. Her greatest achievement, she feels, is her children. They have been the force that drove her to persevere, as she shares that “*solamente le pido al Señor que me dé licencia, que me dé vida para estar al lado de mis hijos*” [I only pray to the Lord to grant me license (permission) to keep me alive so that I can be near my children]. “They need me now to build their future, as I will need them someday. I hope when that time comes, they will lend me their hand without anger, but with love” (Meeting transcript, July 7, 2002). She feels that one of her primary roles as a mother is to encourage religious beliefs in her children: “*eslo ma inpor tante ta mien para mi enseñale el re peto y el temor adios gracias al estamos aqui y tene mos que se gir sus mandamiento mientras el nos de bida tendremos su*

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all vignettes in the remainder of this chapter are from the transcript and journal notes about the meeting that took place in October 19, 2002.

*entimiento y su grasi.*” [My most important task as a mother is to teach (my children) to show respect and fear of the Lord. We are here (in the world) thanks to him, and we must to follow his commands as long as he keeps us alive (and that way) we will receive his wisdom and his grace] (Ofelia’s journal).

Ofelia values her child’s ability to express love, and views her as a capable, intelligent child: “*Yo estoy contenta con mi ija eya es mui dulce cariñoa y pus intelijente*” [I am very happy about my daughter. She is sweet, loving, and intelligent]. She also notices Juanita’s difficulties in school: “She has a difficult time doing mathematics, but I trust her. I know she will keep on, with your help (teacher’s) and ours. Thanks.” (Response to writing prompt: “Tell me about your child.” Translated from Spanish). Her comment is an invitation to work together, school and family, to enhance learning opportunities for her child.

Writing begins this October afternoon by reading the transcript of our previous meeting and chatting for a few minutes about salient aspects of that conversation.

“*Aunque cada persona tiene su forma de escribir las cosas, a veces es difícil escribir*” [“Although everybody has their own particular writing, sometimes writing is very hard], says Sandra, pointing at the various writing styles she has observed in the group. Sandra has found that writing is a bridge between her memories, at times painful, and her hope for the future of her only child. Her writing is epistolary, often metaphoric, intended for her daughter as a future reader. Sandra’s life centers on her family. It is composed of her husband, who immigrated two years before she did, and their eight-year-old daughter. She dreams that her daughter will become a good person and a professional and dreams of an opportunity to become bilingual so that she can use her skills as a business high school graduate in the workplace.



The pressure of her new life in the U.S.A. poses a contradiction for Sandra between family needs and possibilities. Because her migratory status is not yet defined, she is forced to wait for the response to her husband's petition to grant her legal residency. The spouses wait impatiently, hoping that the often-criticized Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) backlog will not stall them from their dreams of "legalization" (Garrett, 2000, p. 11). Sandra has seen her husband's health deteriorate due to long hours of work as a taxi driver and his not maintaining a diet to control his diabetes. She has pleaded with him to teach her to drive and "to give (her) permission" to find a job (Valdés, 1996), but he has been reluctant to jeopardize her chances to obtain legal status. In the end, his poor health leaves them no choice, and Sandra ends up working the night shift in the local poultry industry. Her job as a line worker involves ongoing overtime with no days off, and leaves her tired and in pain, as the routine movements on the job line strain the tendons in her shoulder and hands (Villenas, 2002).

Sandra is determined that her daughter will find a better life through education. The couple models this for her in several ways that include attending English classes and talking with her about the importance of education at home. Moral education is important; still, Sandra does not lose sight of the importance of formal education in this society. Both Sandra and her husband Pedro want to have a part in the formal education of their child and have requested parent-teacher conferences during the first year of Constanza's schooling at Hope Elementary. "Through an interpreter, the teacher said that Constanza was doing fine, considering that she could not speak English, but we still worry that she doesn't want to write in English. She refuses to use the language to communicate with family members who speak it well," confided the parents. "She can be successful, and she also has the will to succeed. Unfortunately, we, her parents have not been able to guide her to become more independent. I would like for you to

guide us so that we can help her a little more” (Parental response to writing prompt, “Tell me about your child,” translated from Spanish).

“¿A qué se debe que uno no se expresa igual que otros?” [“Why is it that someone’s way of expressing (thoughts, feelings) is not the same as others?”] asks Toña, a pleasant lady in her mid-fifties.

“It could be fear. Maybe we are scared of expressing ourselves,” replies Angélica, an analytical, smart, and cautious thirty-seven year-old woman. Angélica understands home life as events in which “*Todos somos personas, yo también necesito mi tiempo y mi propio espacio.*” [“We all are human beings. I need time to myself, and my own space, too”]. She has conveyed that sense of ‘justice’ to her five children, who have learned to be patient and not to make unreasonable demands for her time and attention (Valdés, 1996). Angelica measures her words, carefully weighing what to say and what to keep to herself, yet she shares memories of her early days in the U.S.A. and of what it has taken the family to achieve the relative economic solvency they presently enjoy.

We don’t have complaints about this country, about this state. Everything has been fine, and (it) has given our children and us food to eat. We have been able to progress a little, working hard and with lots of sacrifices. Many people around us are surprised when they see what little we have, especially because only my husband works, and we are so many in the family. (Our progress) is also a result of what we give up. We need to sacrifice some things in order to have some others. We need to adapt to what we have and limit ourselves, as long as we have food to eat . . . . He (her husband) works outside, he does what he can, and we work (at home) saving what he earns. So far, we have been able to pay all our

taxes and everything we need to pay for in this country, because nothing is free, nobody gives us things for free. (Interview transcript, translated from Spanish).

Angelica regrets her reluctance to continue her education beyond the seventh grade, although her parents were very willing to give her such an opportunity:

What little I learned in middle school is helping me now (to help my children). I had to take English, and though I did not like that class much, I had to pass the tests, so I had to learn . . . . at least the basics. I have used the dictionary (to translate) and my husband and I took English classes for about two months. After that, I have been watching T.V. or listening to tapes. I have not enrolled in English classes any more. I know I need to learn it to be able to help my kids, but I'll try harder some time later. (Interview translation, translated from Spanish)

Like Angelica, several parents in the large group acknowledged the importance of learning English in their personal and public lives, and especially, in their roles as parents (meeting transcripts and field notes, September 2001 through May, 2002). In spite of the apparent opportunities available to them (i.e., adult ESOL classes), survival takes most of their energy and they resort to strategies to learn English in their "spare" time, such as using dictionaries, watching television, and listening to tapes in which they invest large amounts of money. Thus, the data in my research contradicts a commonly held belief or myth, that Latino parents resist learning the language and the culture of the U.S.A. (Hamman et al., 2002).

"I'm not scared of writing anymore, but I'm still having difficulties writing details. Every time I think I'm finished with my writing, I realize that I have left out important details," says Toña. In the safety of the group, Toña has found a place to vent, to relieve the psychological pressures of her life in the United States. Although she is the oldest person in the

group, she is also the most in need, the most impoverished, and among those with the lowest educational achievement level (second grade.) “It is hard for me to tell (*platicar*) my story, because every time I remember the story of my life, *me dá tristeza y sentimiento*” [I get sad and feel like crying], she continues, reminding us that life is unfinished, that it is also a continuous rewriting, retelling, and reliving. As Linda B, a participant in the HIV support group that is the focus of Lather and Smithies’s book *Troubling the Angels*, pointed out, “Life is a collection of experiences and there has to be a reason for it” (1997, p. 152).

Writing offers Toña a window into her experiences, a new lens to understand how the decisions she made affect her life and that of her young child. It is also the beginning of a quest (Richardson, 1994), an uneven struggle filled with obstacles where all the odds appear to be against her.

Toña, the grandmother, longs for the opportunities she left behind when she agreed to cross the border to help her oldest daughter in Georgia. As she shares information about Chavis, she writes using the first person, becoming the girl’s voice:

I was born in Coah. (Coahuila.) My parents helped me learn how to walk my first steps. My parents love me very much. When I was one year old, we used to go out to the parks, where I run and played on the playground. I have two mothers, and they both love me very much. They both buy me things. I went to Kinder in Mexico. My mother picked me up from school every day, and she also took me to school daily. My mother participated in school. She helped my teachers in many ways. She helped them shop for the festivals. I like it when my mother participates in the school events. My home is in Mexico. It has 4 bedrooms and 2

bathrooms, the main room, and a laundry room. I have my own bedroom, where I keep all my toys (Answer to writing prompt: “Tell me about your child”).

Chavis’ life took a drastic turn when the family came to the U.S. Born out of wedlock from Toña’s daughter, Chavis is being raised by her grandparents and calls them her parents. In addition, current living arrangements cause constant stress upon the child, whose “cousin” (half-sister) belittles her, as do her “sister” (biological mother) and brother-in-law (stepfather). “I tell my daughter, don’t you think that *se me hace feo que la hagan un lado a Chavis?* [I feel bad when you push Chavis away?] They go out on Sundays and buy things for their daughter, Jackie. Chavis just looks at them, and I know she feels bad that they do not take her along,” confides Toña as we drive back from one of our group meetings (February 9, 2002). Yet, she is cautious as to what she shares, perhaps a result of my continuous reminders to the group of my legal responsibility to report any situation that could potentially or actually harm the children. Nevertheless, I share my fears with her homeroom teacher and with the school counselor. We are able to direct the family towards social service agencies in the area that provide food and clothing to them.

“I feel sad about what I’ve left behind, yet, when I write, I remember many things and writing *me ayuda a cambiar la tristeza por esperanza* [helps me trade sadness for hope],” I reassure Toña as I offer my views about writing as a catalytic space in life. Our dialogic exchange positions us as equal partners, and, coupled with narrative (oral and written) constitutes our research method. Freire (1982) pointed out that, “In a humanizing pedagogy the method ceases to be an instrument (. . . to) manipulate the students . . . , because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves” (p. 55). As a member of the group, I share my experiences as a writer who found in poetry a way to express my inner conflicts during my

adolescence. Writing has helped me learn more about my second language and more in my second language. I add that all writers “correct” and change their work, and that adding detail is a scholarly exercise and learning experience.

“*Bueno, entonces es como contar lo que vivimos y luego lo que aprendí de eso,*” adds Angelica, pointing out that writing is, indeed, telling our stories and reflecting on what we learned from them. Writing our experiences helps us step back and look at otherwise common events from a different perspective because, “To see again what had already been seen before always implies seeing angles that were not perceived before” (Freire, 1997/2000, p. 38.) In the case of our group, writing becomes an initial step towards *praxis* (Freire 1984). *Praxis*, the interaction of theory, practice, and reflection about our lives, about what is problematic and puzzling, about what is demeaning and dehumanizing. *Praxis* that aims at generating *concientización*, or awareness of oppressive practices to act upon and change them.

The group engages in individual writing for several minutes. As they write, Sandra and Ofelia want to ‘run their writing’ by me. They want to “make sure they are on the right track.” I remind them that I am not the teacher any more, I am just a peer, but they insist in talking with me alone. By denying my role as a teacher in my interactions with the group, I urge them to shatter the myth of the “professor”: “They call themselves ignorant and say the ‘professor’ is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen” (Freire, 1982, p. 49). I am *also* learning in this process. For we are all sharing our life experiences, a wealth of knowledge accumulated throughout our lives. Thus, I am both student and teacher, one who hopes that many Latino children and their families will benefit from the product of our dialogues in the group, just as they, the group, are teachers, researchers, and co-learners (Freire, 1982).

More than a writing conference, our time away from the group is an opportunity to share intimate details of our lives, experiences that they do not know how to convey to their co-researchers. For some reason, my presence in the group reassures them, helps them feel at ease. They trust me as a link between the familiar and the unfamiliar, a group member who has experienced the educational system in my Spanish-speaking country of origin and in the Anglo-speaking environment of the American public schools as an insider (teacher, student) and as an outsider, or advocate (Field notes).

Soon we regroup. Zunilda<sup>12</sup>, a beautiful young woman in her thirties, shares what she wrote. Her narrative is a mixture of reading and recalling, as she often mixes new memories with reading the story she wrote. The group listens attentively, without interrupting. They show their connectedness through a quiet, nonverbal language of empathy.

### *Journey Through Fear*

*“Bueno yo voy a platicar un poco de cuando yo me vine para acá a Estados Unidos. Esto es lo que yo escribí. Me faltó mucho, pero aquí vá.”* [Well, I am going to tell you about when I came to the United States. This is what I wrote. A lot is missing, but here it goes.]

I was born in Jalisco, on a small *rancho* [village] called Tamazula. Our parents never talked to us about anything, we grew up like. . . . how would you say? At the mercy of time. They did have ‘*costumbres*’ [rules] for us, such as not to be out at a certain hours, and they prohibited us from doing certain things. However, they never talked with us about what was coming up for us in life; nor did they discuss sex or talk about (what to expect) when we grew older, nothing about that.

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<sup>12</sup> Although the narrative names Zunilda as the protagonist, this section was actually co-constructed by the small (writing) group.

Mexican professor and author Jorge Bustamante (1997) studied Mexican immigration to the United States, combining surveys with participant observation -i.e., crossing the border while pretending to be an undocumented immigrant-. He argued that most undocumented immigrants come from economically deprived sections in the country. The first week after he was caught and deported to Mexico, he traveled around the birthplace of some of the men who were deported with him: *“No exagero al decir que esta región es un muestrario de pobreza en grados casi increíbles. Me sentí avergonzado de ignorar hasta dónde se puede ser pobre.”* [I am not exaggerating to describe this region as one with incredible degrees of poverty. I was ashamed of myself for ignoring to what degree people can be poor]. (p. 103)

In addition to economic deprivation, Zunilda grew up restricted, banned from doing certain things instead of encouraged to learn what to do. Sexual education was not discussed in the childhood homes of the parents in this research, and, with few exceptions, very little conversation took place about the future, especially in terms of the children's education.

What their country of origin called discipline and what by U.S. standards would be considered child abuse appear difficult to separate in the childhood homes of most co-researchers, who reported corporal, psychological, and emotional abuse at the hands of their parents, as Zunilda narrated:

My dad was a stern, mean person. His understanding of discipline was to beat us very hard for the smallest things. Once he beat my brother and me so hard that we could not walk. He was ill tempered, and I was never able to communicate with him. I never felt a loved daughter.... I cannot say that I had a beautiful relationship with my dad, or that he ever caressed me, or (called me) 'his daughter,' until I was about 14. Now (as an adult) I can feel his love. When I



was a little girl. . . . I don't remember him ever showing me love . . . . My mother put me down right before the eyes of others. She used to grab a belt and hit me, never mind that others were present . . . .

Like Zunilda, all the mothers in the writing group worked as children and reported some kind of deprivation and/or abuse, especially toward their mothers.

Once I heard a dull sound, like repeated thumps in the bedroom and when I peeked in, I saw my mother on the floor, my father sitting on her chest hitting her with his fists. I asked my mother why is she still with him, why does she allow him to mistreat her (Ana.<sup>13</sup> Field notes).

Such marital abuse was perpetuated in their own marriages for some of the women both in the writing group and in the large group: "Time went by and my husband started to mistreat me. I began to lose my respect for him. Everything disappears, even love, when there is violence at home" (Zunilda). In such situations, alcohol is usually involved, and the women tend to accept their oppressive situation as the will of God, what they call their *cruz* [cross]. In addition, they did not appear to be used to discussing such violence with others. Only after a school-wide meeting in which I invited a local institution to inform parents about legal issues surrounding domestic violence (see appendix E) did some of the mothers in the large group approach me to share their concerns about how such experiences could have affected their children. For instance, Rocío, a young mother of four who had noticed that her son, Juan, was extremely introverted and nervous, confided that she had come to the state running away from an abusive husband. Her children were also victims of his abuse when they attempted to defend her from a brutal beating. "He kicked and punched me. As he started to choke me, I began to lose consciousness, so my children jumped on him, the oldest on his back and (Juan) started to kick

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<sup>13</sup> A member of the writing group, Ana's story is the topic of chapter 5.

him on his legs. He slapped Juan, sending him to the couch, and shook the older away, throwing him on the floor. I lay down, semi-conscious as I heard my children crying. He then left the apartment. After that, I asked my children not to intervene again, but they told me that they would not let him hurt me anymore, so I left him, for fear that he would hurt my children badly.” Rocío accepted violence upon her without question, only her motherly concern causing her to leave her husband.

At the same meeting about domestic violence, Ana pointed out, “I do not understand how a woman can let a man hit her, when we have hands and knees to defend ourselves” (April 13, 2002). Many people in the audience chuckled, except some men. Zunilda confided that her husband said,

Is that what you do at those meetings? They are just “*puros mitotes*,” gossip. If that’s what you do there, I am not coming again. *Entonces no hubiera ningún matrimonio porque así son todos. Si de cualquier cosa la mujer ya lo va a dejar, pues no habría ningún hogar.* [All (men) are like that (hit their women). If his woman is going to leave him at the smallest thing, then there would be no homes, no marriages left] (Interview transcript).

As Zunilda reported, her husband views spousal abuse as a natural occurrence in the family. She is puzzled about his past, as she realized, very seldom does he discuss it. He also believes that their son Alex must endure on his own the various situations in his life: “*Cuando le digo a él que el niño necesita de diálogo y de ayuda, el me dice, ‘Yo no necesité de eso cuando yo era niño. Yo solito ya sabía todo, pero no tuve nada con mis padres’* [When I tell him (her husband) that the child (Alex) needs help and dialogue, he tells me, ‘I didn’t need that when I was a child. I knew things by myself. I did not have anything to do with my parents] (Interview

transcript). Thus, it appears that many of the men in the group did not attend because our meetings were aimed to raise awareness about daily occurrences in the lives of the families. Yet, as the mothers realized the power of the topics being discussed, they convinced their husbands to attend several meetings, including the one we held on domestic violence. In addition, some of the topics conflicted with their experiences and views of the world, confronting their daily practices as oppressors, which points at one of the difficulties of doing PAR (and/ or feminist research) with this group.

In this account, Zunilda describes her husband, a product of a patriarchal society, reproducing the system in which he grew up. To him, domestic violence is a normal occurrence in a marriage, as can be evidenced in his words: If a woman leaves her husband “*at the smallest thing, then there would be no homes, no marriages left.*” His trivialization of his acts of violence towards his family are related to the identity construction of some Mexican women, such as those Villenas (2001) described. In the two documents I examined for this dissertation, Villenas studied the identity construction of Latinas experiencing a racist environment in North Carolina. The Latina mothers in Villenas’ study, compared themselves to the North American mother, asserting that Latinas’ moral education positions them as “women of their home” (p. 18-19) and is superior to the moral education of the Anglo mothers. To many Latino women, being a woman of her home implies silently accepting spousal abuse, as will be seen later in this chapter. Such argument, a clear example discourse at the service of oppression, is held among male Latinos who encourage, require, and value this trait as an integral, constitutive element of “femininity.”

As the writing group in our participatory action research engaged in dialogues that emanated from their individually chosen research topics,<sup>14</sup> the group recognized themselves in the narratives of their co-investigators and joined in the analysis of such experiences. And even though several women identified domestic violence as physical abuse, they were not aware of other forms of abuse (psychological, emotional, economic, sexual). At our face-validity meeting, Zunilda reads from the transcript of her interview:

Oftentimes he came home at night, a drunk. I would be sleeping and he used to bother me, to pull the blankets away, to pull my pajamas, whatever he could. I did not do anything to him, yet he would come to bother me, and I was mad at him because he was drunk and because he came home late. I would get up, upset, and go away from him, but he chased me around and kicked me, he even . . . . It was a hard life to me (Interview transcript).

Noticing her hesitation as she reads this paragraph, I ask if she wants me to take it out. “I don’t know if that would be . . . . I guess if I didn’t want to . . . . He would get mad at me because I didn’t want to . . . .,” she replies. “Yes,” I softly point out. “There’s rape in marriage as well.” She continues to cry as I attempt to reassure her, informing her of her rights as a woman in the U.S.A. In the end, she tells me to include the paragraph, “(Latino) women need to be aware of such things,” she said (Face validity meeting, July 17, 2002).

Domestic violence leaves lasting scars on children, as not only are they witnesses but also the victims of the abuse of their father and scapegoats for their mothers: “*Yo no me daba cuenta, pero yo recalaba con mis hijos.*” [I was not aware of my actions but I took it (out) upon my

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<sup>14</sup> Angélica, Ofelia, and Sandra were concerned about helping their children in school; Ana explored how to agent for her children in the school, and Zunilda focused on domestic violence.

children.] Thus, when Zunilda reported her son Alex's behavior towards his sister and toward her,

*Me dijo, "ojalá te murieras! Yo no quiero que tú seas mi mamá" Y con un odio, se le vé que le salen chispas, de así del odio, y se le ve malo. El siempre me ha pegado a mi.*" [He told me, "I wish you were dead! I do not want you for my mother" With such a hate, his eyes lit with hate, and he looks wicked. He has always hit me]

In the privacy of my classroom, we re-read the entire transcript. She began to realize her child's conflicting feelings of anger and love toward her, and anger, love, and fear toward his father:

*Ayer me dijo, "Mami... yo soy bien malo, mami." "No mijo, usted es bien bueno," le dije. Ya cuando ya se le pasa el coraje le digo, "¿Mijo, por que haces eso? ¿Por qué?" "Ay mami, siento una rabia!" me dice él. "Yo no sé por qué siento mucho coraje."* [He told me yesterday, "Mami, I'm very mean, mami." "No, my son, you are a very good kid," I told him. After he calms down I ask him, "My son, why do you do that? Why?" "Ay, mami, I feel such a rage!" he tells me. "I do not know why I feel such a rage"] (Interview transcript).

At the same time, Zunilda reported, the mention of his father sometimes spurs Alex to behave: *"Y yo a veces le digo, '¿No quieres leer? Vamos con tu papá!' 'No, sí leo!'"* ["And sometimes I tell him, "You don't want to read? Let's go with your dad." "No, I'm going to read!"] Alex was a witness to many instances of abuse toward his mother and reminded her with fear not to provoke the ire of his father:

One day I went out to watch the soccer game. He was there, watching the game . . . . I went with Alex who, at the time, was about two years old. When my husband saw me, he walked straight to me, and dragged me out of there, all the way back home. When we arrived home . . . . he started to kick me on the shin . . . . The children were there, watching, but he did not care. He kept on kicking me . . . . (Alex) became very scared of him after that day. Some time later we walked by that place (the soccer field) and (Alex) said, “Mommy, do not go there. If you do, my dad will hit you!” I will never forget that. I now often remind my husband of that, that Alex is still scared of him” (Interview transcript).

Zunilda’s concerns extend to her oldest son: “I fear for him. I fear when he gets married, because he is very violent. He has a lot of hatred, a lot of anger. I tell him, when a woman is abused at home, she would rather be the oldest dog in the house. He tells me, well, they’d better not do anything to me. If they don’t do wrong to me, I will not wrong them either.” Thus, violence is learned at home and can be perpetuated by the children as they grow older and marry.

Church plays an important role in these women lives as they attempt to understand the oppressive and patriarchal relationships in their lives. Zunilda reported some of the conversations she had sustained with her priest,

“He told me, those are the chains we have to carry in our lives. He also said, I need to work hard to make my marriage work. I need not selfishly think about myself, but to keep in mind that we have children” (Face validity meeting, July 17, 2002).

Like Zunilda, other mothers in the research group reported that they seek the advice of their church as they attempt to make sense of their lives, yet none reported that they learned

about their human rights as wives in this country. They learned, however, to conform and suffer in silence so that their children will not go through the experience of a broken family, thus, perpetrating the oppressive situations in which they live their lives. Ironically, the effects of domestic violence on their children did not appear to be taken into consideration when the women were advised to stay in their marriage relationships. What is obvious to me is that as these families seek information and help, if schools do not foster opportunities for education, religious institutions will. Yet the payoffs for the games played by the school, with its emphasis on academic achievement, and church, with its emphasis on preserving the unity of the families, are, obviously, different.

Children who live in violent environments could experience difficulties learning and interacting with others. Conversely, children who know a peaceful, encouraging environment are believed to have better opportunities for success. Those co-researchers who reported growing up with parents who expressed positive views of education were more active in the schooling of their children at Hope Elementary -attending school meetings, engaging in learning activities with their children at home-than those who reported a lack of such parental attitudes. Therefore, I believe that these parents rely heavily on their own early experiences to rear their children. In addition, those parents who attended church and/or school informational meetings dealing with education showed an interest in trying different approaches to education, suggesting that both church and school play a crucial role in the socialization of these children in the U.S.A. Schools and church influence the socialization of children and families in two ways, through direct interactions and indirectly through the parents as learning and socializing agents.

### *The Extended Family*

Valdés (1994) argued that the extended family constitutes a support network for Latino families; yet several co-researchers in the large group described the extended family, particularly in-laws, as a group that controls, exercises moral judgment and deprives them of some of their most vital rights. Especially when related by marriage, the extended family often justifies, approves, and supports male abusive behavior toward women, many times encouraging husbands to physically punish their wives:

My in-laws gathered to make “sessions.” They would make me sit in the middle of a circle, surrounded by people. It was tough for me; they humiliated and put me down. If I did anything wrong, or if my cousin (who was married to one of my husband’s brothers) did any thing wrong, they (the in-laws) would call a meeting. It was just as if I was the accused and they were the jury and the judges. They would decide what did I do right and what did I do wrong. “This (woman) is . . . .” Everybody gave opinions. When they finished, my husband would mistreat me, sometimes in front of them all (Zunilda, meeting transcript).

The extended family can also tax the limited resources of the family or conflict with their traditions and beliefs, especially when it comes to raising children (interview transcripts). By contrast, blood-related family (i.e., parents and siblings) is sympathetic and helpful towards those family members who are experiencing hardship, as when Zunilda’s sister offered to hide her from her husband and helped her to come to America:

I told my sister what was going on and she said, “*Lárgalo!*” “Let him go! Let’s go, we are about to leave for the United States.” I did not know that she was



about to leave the country! She had already planned to leave in a week. “*Vente,*” [Come with us,] she said, and they hid me from my husband.

The families resort to anyone who holds some knowledge about their new country to understand the system and to survive in the U.S., including teachers, family members, and friends when they manage to make friendships. In their relationships with the extended family in the U.S., the parents in this research pointed at trade-like transactions to survive on limited resources (mainly housing and babysitting.)

### *Crossing the Border*

As Hispanics migrate to the United States, much discussion centers around their motivation to leave their countries of origin. Several critics and researchers (Bustamante, 1997; Ramos, 2000) have pointed out economic and political reasons behind migration to various parts of the globe, and Suarez-Orozco (2001) claimed it to be a result of a global economy. Violence as a cause for migration is mostly acknowledged when it is politically related, yet other forms such as domestic violence are not recognized, and Zunilda reminds us, there are still women who are abused worldwide:

I left my country, running away from that situation, because I knew that wasn't a good life for my children, to see that. . . . example: Quarrels, screaming, and all of that. I said, “That's enough!” I always remained *so scared*, then I got to thinking, how is it possible that I am scared of my own husband? (Interview transcript).

Regardless of the motives for leaving their countries of origin, the underlying reasons are very likely to be oppression and subhuman living conditions that prompt people to search for “a better life.” The media has reported about the perils facing immigrants; however, little has been

said about the journey of smuggling into the country and how it affects a child's life. The narrative that follows is a co-construction by the writing group who shared their experiences in the journey to America. It is intentionally presented in their own words to allow for a vivid picture of what they went through in their trip to the U.S.A. The group co-constructed this narrative, noting similarities in their stories, which prompted us to write it as Zunilda's story, allowing a smooth flow of the events they experienced when coming to the U.S.

### *A Group's Story*

One of the difficulties in writing research, I stated earlier, resides in the impossibility to record simultaneous analyses from multiple perspectives. The stories presented in this chapter call for cohesiveness, ensured by keeping the narrative together, and for segmentation to analyze the processes of construction of the narrative and meaning-making in which the group engaged.

The writing group uncovered some generative themes, which derived from the universal themes proposed at the beginning of the participatory action research. Such universal themes resulted from my personal interest in studying parental involvement and its relationship to academic learning of the children in my ESOL class. Among the generative themes encountered with the group of co-researchers were home-school communications, participation, racism, myths, helping children with academic needs, family structure, domestic violence, child abuse, patriarchy, oppression, marginalization, and exploitation. As the parents uncovered the topics, Freire's theory came into play and we engaged in several of the stages proposed in his methodology of *Circles of Culture*.

Toña's initial observation about the differences and difficulties of writing focuses the group on writing as a mechanical process. The dialogue that followed allowed us to connect writing to enhancing critical thinking and praxis. When Angelica summarized our conversation,

pointing out that writing is about our own experiences, the group wrote individually. Their stories indicated domination, patriarchy, and violence. They talked about lack of opportunity and, above all, fear:

“I left my country, running away from that situation [of domestic violence,] because I knew that wasn’t a good life for my children, to see that . . . . example: Quarrels, screaming, and all of that. I said, “That’s enough!” I always remained *so scared*, then I got to thinking, how is it possible that I am scared of my own husband?

To overcome their worries, the co-researchers resorted to faith, attending masses and carrying images of saints, in a desperate cry for protection in their journey. At the Mexico-U.S. border, they encountered yet more perils: unreliable smugglers, who were always drunk, and a ferocious river that, they knew, had taken away many lives. As Zunilda faced the river, a sense of overwhelming guilt increased her fear:

“[The river] appeared so big to me that I looked at it with dismay. I just said, *Ay, Dios mio. Mis hijos!* [Oh, my God. My children!] If one of my children drowns here, I will be responsible for his or her faith.

Fearing for their lives and for their personal integrity, Zunilda’s family made tremendous efforts not to call the attention of the immigration patrol:

“The men wanted to know who was first and started to take their clothes off. They had to take their clothes off because they were going to swim. They put us on slim tubes, similar to a tire inflated with air, and asked, “Who wants to go first?” My oldest sister said, “I’ll go first, so that if something happens, (the river) can take me.” So she dared first, she went with her youngest daughter, who was three years old. One of the men swam, pushing the tube with my

sister and her daughter on it. My brother-in-law, my sister's husband, went next. As he went on the tube, we knelt down on the shore, praying to the Lord: *Señor, ayúdalos*. [Lord, help them!] As our relatives crossed the river, we were praying and crying. I crossed last with my son, Alex. I was so scared! I had some money that I carried on my breast. When I saw that everybody else was at the other side of the river and I was alone with Alex on this side, I took the money, ready to hand it to the men if they attempted to rape me. I got to thinking, *Ay, Dios mio!* [Oh, my God!] I'm the last one to go, what if they attempt to rape me, now that I am here by myself? Finally, it was my turn to cross the river. Clutching his dad's picture under his right arm, Alex was screaming and crying. *Mami!* And I (said), *Callate, mijo, porque nos van a ver* [Hush, my son, or they will see us].

Tears are running down Zunilda's cheeks, as she apologizes to the group: *Yo soy bien llorona, discúlpenme*. [I am very sentimental and cry easily, forgive me.] Nobody talks, and nobody dares to look at other's faces, as some of us are crying while others struggle to hold back our tears. Zunilda keeps on.

"I was afraid that if he did not stop crying they (the immigration authorities) would see us. And the men? Swimming. We were on the tubes, and they were pushing us. It was such a hard experience that I kept on praying, My God, my children! Please take me, but do not take them. As Alex and I crossed the river, my daughter knelt down on the other side of the river, praying, *Diosito, Diosito*. [Dear God, Dear God!] "Please make the young one shut up because the *migra* (immigration) is going to find us here."

After a long walk, the group found a cabin. They begged the cabin residents for water. The presence of children in the group moved the owners to spare some water to the travelers.

The journey continued as the group attempted to cross a second checkpoint. This time, they chose to ride under the front of a truck:

They put a wide iron platform under the truck. My sister, my daughter, and I clung there while the iron bars shook with every movement of the truck. Immigration officials checked the truck, using dogs to sniff it, yet they did not smell us.

Shattering the myth of the extended family, Zunilda continues, “Our next stay was in the house of one of my sisters-in-law. It was very hard for us to live there because it was a one room house. It was very hot there, in Texas, and the air conditioner was broken. My sister-in-law blamed us for every thing that went wrong, she even said that we messed up the air conditioner. She kept a long face. She did not want us to stay there with her.” Such a myth was discussed in the group, as several mothers reported having such similar experiences involving their political families.

Zunilda continues, “When we finally arrived in Georgia, Alex was still holding his dad’s picture under his arm. He never let it out of his arms during the whole journey. We gave thanks to the Lord for his protection, because it was very hard to make it to the United States.”

#### *A Better (~~Life~~) Lie*

Zunilda stops her narrative. Nobody dares to talk. I too feel speechless and overwhelmed by her story, so compelling and unexpected. What should I say, what can I do? Sandra comes timidly to the rescue with her counter-narrative, which is her way of making sense of the experience:

“I wrote a letter to my daughter. I tell her some things like what you just said. We came here ‘*a retar la vida*,’ to dare and challenge life, risking our own lives, never mind that we did not speak the language or that we did not know the (local) customs. We go to work with courage

and inner strength because we know that someone is waiting for us at home. As we recover from bad times (*la mala racha*), both spouses work together to provide for our families, *para poder sustentar los gastos que se le presentan*. In the end, I am left with a question, *¿Es feliz aquí el niño?* [Is the child happy here?] Coming to the United States is like a two-edged sword. There are more opportunities to work here, and (when we are in our homeland) we believe that life here is wonderful; however, once we are here, we have to work long hours. Our children are left alone for the most part of the day, and we hardly see our spouses. And when we are working, we constantly wonder about our children. It is very hard to find babysitting for them. That is why ‘wearing someone else’s shoes’ is so important. People in our countries need to hear the true story of the immigrants, although I do not believe that will change their minds about coming here. Many people who still live in our countries are in similar conditions to those in which we are here. *La gente ha vivido en esa situación y es por eso que no vamos a lograr que las personas cambien de un día para otro*. [People have lived in that situation and that’s why we will not get them to change in a day or two.]

Sandra’s central question, “Is the child happy here?” encompasses a deeper probe. It is a challenge to the status quo, acknowledging the myth of “a better life” which is denied to the “have nots,” those who do not arrive with documents (Garrett, 2000, p. 7). She points at the mirage of the “wonderful life” awaiting immigrants that infuses the dreams of those left behind. “Everybody who goes back to Mexico who has been in the United States presents a wonderful image of life *en el Norte* (up North.) They make it sound as if money is found on the streets and all people has to do is bend down and take it. Nobody talks about the hardships of labor and the low wages, or the meager conditions in which we have to work.” (See also Chapman, 2001.)

In her assessment of Zunilda's account, Sandra brings to the surface what price immigrants pay to come to America: loss. She regrets the loss of time to share with her family, the loss of opportunities to communicate, and a loss of identity and hope. Sandra believes, people they left behind must become aware of such losses before they leave their countries of origin. The right to a voice and to the opportunity to make decisions about their own lives is not counted as a loss, because the geographical change does not affect the status of submission and voicelessness in which these women have lived their lives in their countries of origin (Chapman, 2001; Walsh, 1991.) Yet Sandra is coming to realize that the group has something important to say, that they must share their experiences: "It is important that we share our experiences so that people in our countries will hear the truth." Still, she acknowledges a lack of political consciousness among Hispanics: people will not change in a day or two.

As the group shares, Toña reflects on the experience, making connections to her own life:

*A veces Chavis me pregunta, cuando nos vamos a Mexico?' Yo le digo, 'Ahora no, hija.' Y ella me dice, "Pues si nos vamos a pasar por el rio otra vez, yo mejor me quedo aqui.' Por eso cuando me le hacen feo a Chavis, yo le digo a hija, la mas grande. Sabes que? Yo no me he ido porque si me regreso a Mexico, ni aunque volviera a nacer me regreso al norte."* [Sometimes Chavis asks me, when are we going back to Mexico? I tell her, 'Not now, my daughter,' and she tells me, 'If we are going back through the river, I would rather stay here.' That is why when (my daughter's family) mistreats Chavis, I tell my older daughter, 'Do you know what? I haven't left, because if I go back to Mexico, I wouldn't go back to the north even if I am born again.]

Consistent with Freirean theory, Zunilda described a challenging situation in concrete terms. Because the group had experienced similar experiences, the coded topic was easy for them to understand. As Sandra shared her analysis, she encouraged the group to reflect to uncover the interactions among the parts: The families moved up North in search for a better life, yet, they encountered isolation, oppression, and fear.

*Acculturation, Ambición, Vision, and Educación.*

While denouncing the subhuman living conditions of Brazilian peasants, Paulo Freire (1982) argued that any situation constitutes oppression if it denies people of their ontological vocation (being human). Being human includes a person's right to choose, to live in decent conditions (a safe environment), to have a voice, to pursue happiness. Education, Freire argues, is a key in people's (de-)/humanization. A lack of education or an education that only transmits knowledge and values (banking education) contributes to de-humanizing processes by ripping away people's opportunities for critical thinking. By contrast, critical education (progressive education) focuses on the socio-historical present in which people are immersed. Rather than transmitting contents and values, a liberating pedagogy fosters dialogue among the actors (learners-teachers) and encourages them to engage in joint searches to promote better living conditions for all.

Some scholars, nevertheless, have criticized the use of education as a means of promoting parental involvement, arguing that any such initiatives would result in acculturation that will change the "delicate structure" of these families (Valdés, 1996). Freire conceives of education as opportunities to enhance our views of the world, to be able to understand, to make connections and political choices as we exercise our right to be human. In addition, critical education



provides all with opportunities to learn: such as the case at hand, where I learned that my co-researchers, though initially reserved and timid, had many hopes and dreams.

Yo también voy a la escuela, y el maestro, el habla muy bien, sus hijos de él. . . .  
tienen estudio. Y yo estoy pensando en mi cabeza, bueno, yo no lo tuve, pero voy  
a hacer que mi hijo lo tenga . . . esa es la realidad de las cosas. Que nosotros no  
tenemos ambición. Los Hispanos. Solamente porque estudiamos poco en nuestro  
país, y ya. Ellos (los Americanos) se basan para criticarnos en eso, pero si  
nosotros tenemos más ambición, así como los que estamos aquí, los niños van a  
llegar a ser (pausa) la meta que ellos quieren, que nosotros tenemos, van a llegar  
a tenerla. Pero el que tiene una meta aquí la va a lograr y la va a hacer, y los  
niños también. *[I go to school too, and the teacher speaks very well, his children  
. . . . are educated. And I'm thinking in my head, well, I didn't have it (schooling),  
but I will make (sure) my child will (have an education). . . . The truth is, we,  
Hispanics, do not have ambition. (We are content) just with what little we studied  
in our countries, (thus) the Americans criticize us on those grounds. But if (all  
Hispanics) were more ambitious, just as those of us who are here today, the  
children could become (pause) (They will reach) their goals, and our goals. He  
who has a goal here will accomplish it, and so will his children (meeting  
transcript, March 16, 2002).*

The parents in this research sought out opportunities to learn. Several attended English as a Second Language classes or interacted with the children at home, as long as their growing language differences allowed such interactions: “(Our language) stops us from teaching our children. We teach them in Spanish, and they are learning in English. To motivate the girl (his

daughter) to learn Spanish, I told her ‘I am going to teach you, you will teach me (English) but I also want you to teach your mother, I want you to become her teacher. If you are learning English in the school, I would like for you to teach it to your mother.’ I then talked to my wife, I told her, ‘If they try to talk to you in English, ask them what that does mean and try to answer to them in English so that they will see that you are also learning.’” (Parent intervention, March 16, 2002.) Therefore, it appears to me, parental involvement of Hispanics in the education of their children is not the problem. Attitudes toward the parents, with the underlying stereotypes of Hispanics as being powerless, ignorant, and conformist, are the problem.

Stances that view education solely as an agent of acculturation are dangerous; among other things, they ignore the socio-political changes in the lives of immigrant parents. Education, I stated earlier, can serve to acculturate or to elicit critical assessment of our daily realities. The co-researchers’ accounts of their experiences in their journey to the United States offer vivid examples of their resilience and determination to survive. Many also struggle to learn the English language, although the demands of the struggle for basic survival for their families quickly supplant their opportunities to attend classes. Hispanics learn to navigate the system, usually with the help of a family mentor who came before they did (Valdés, 1996) and strive to progress and to offer better opportunities to their children. However, they encounter many obstacles in the pursuit of their goals.

Moving into another culture itself alters the family balance. Even more so when their new lifestyles take a toll on the kinds of interactions they had in their countries of origin. The parents need to be aware of the requirements of their new society, so that they can transition themselves and bridge transitions for their families. In other words, if we deny them opportunities to learn the system and to develop critical thinking, to a certain degree, we are

failing both the families and the children. In addition, these families need to learn how to survive and to communicate in a different language while already living in a different culture that is very difficult to understand. For instance, what constitutes acceptable practices in their countries of origin could create legal problems for the families in America (Bustamante, 1997), and the children often resort to half-truths to blackmail their parents. This diminishes parental authority and alters the family balance, a product of their cultural upbringing (see, for instance, Rodriguez, 1982).

The parents in the writing group investigated the impact of the limited time they have to interact with the children and its relationship to social problems of delinquency and drug abuse. This is a valid question worthy of future inquiry. They also wanted to learn more about child abuse and the law, attempting to ascertain their right to discipline their children versus what U.S. law considers unreasonable punishment. To these parents, discipline is an act of love, a way to usher the child into adulthood; still, they were not clear about how spanking and child abuse differ.

Education does not take place where there is no learning (Freire, 1986). Therefore, education has a potential to improve our panoramic vision about the world in which we live and allows us to be part of that world. Few people would argue against life as learning, and learning as an important survival skill. People learn through interactions in their immediate world, but they also learn through religion and the media. Critical education draws on the learner's experiences to facilitate critical thinking, offering new views of the conditions in which we live our lives. Critical education in parental involvement allows for all the people who interact to learn from and with each other, to enable individuals to widen their repertoire of possibilities in making decisions.

The writing group continues their conversation, as Angelica adds: “I listen to her (Toña) and think that my parents were very responsible. I think it must be very hard to live without the support of your parents. It must be tough. My parents made mistakes. Nobody is perfect. Still, they were responsible parents. I remember their ways to show their love, and I am thankful to them. It is painful to wonder how much longer will it be without seeing them again, and not knowing how they are doing. We cannot deny that time goes by, and works its own ways. *Cuántas cosas por decir, cuántos abrazos por dar, cuántas bendiciones por recibir.* [So many things to say, so many hugs to give, so many blessings to receive.] I remember my dad, always worrying about us, making sure we had plenty to eat, giving us his love and his company. It is beautiful to remember that he was there for me. Things are different here. We come, hoping for a better life, for a better future for our children, and what do we find? We find pain and difficulties from the very moment we leave our homes.”

Angélica stops, realizing that she has stepped in murky waters. She then cautiously asks whether I’ll be “in trouble” for being a confidant of their immigration stories. Will I be required to “report them” to immigration authorities? I do not know the answer to that question, but I do know about my commitment to my students that prompted my involvement in this research. Someone has to tell the story, somebody must dare to challenge the silence imposed upon us. Taboo, or what is ‘forbidden,’ is one of the mechanisms used to silence and oppress (Fals Borda, 2001). When people are banned from discussing their own realities, when they are afraid of just thinking about what troubles and terrorizes them, there is no room for reasoning; there is no room for praxis. Freire (1982) calls this the “culture of silence” surrounding the oppressed. A culture of silence ensures the oppressors’ power over the oppressed.

I answer that I will not disclose personal information about them. Their identities will be kept a secret, and I will continue to help them tell their stories without pretending to be their voices. Yet, throughout the entire process of working with the larger group first, and now with the smaller writing group, I keep on questioning my roles, my approach to enhance dialogic processes without being abusive or intrusive, without de-humanizing my peers, without, somehow, forcing them to situations of watchfulness and anguish.

### *The Socio-Political Arena*

The phenomenon of immigration points at a complex global economy (Suarez-Orozco, 2001) as well as at uneven power relationships within the country of origin and the destination country and also the uneven power relations between that country and the country of origin (Garrett, 2000). Ramos (2000) argues that immigration is a result of economic forces of offer and demand, “*push factors*—a lack of work, low educational levels, political repression. . . .--and they (immigrants) arrive in the United States because they are needed here (*pull factors*)” (p. 24. See also Bustamante, 1997). Ramos also argues that immigration is “more than a legal or national security problem. It is due to offer and demand laws. As long as there is employment in the United States and unemployed workers south of the border, undocumented immigration (towards the north) will continue” (p. 23. Translated from Spanish).

Undocumented immigrants are in the middle of a political struggle to avoid accountability, coupled with the anger of some who feel that the “sanctity of their country” has been violated. While politicians in their countries of origin claim to advocate for the undocumented immigrants’ rights (Rodríguez Galaz, 2001) little is done to ensure that they will have access to more humane practices in social services, labor, and daily living conditions. It is as if these immigrants are taken at face value, as if all that counts is the *remesas* (money wires)

they send back home. They benefit little from investing in their countries, and even if they work in the U.S.A., they hardly ever qualify for social services. As Garrett (2000) pointed out:

The argument of the anti-immigrant lobby that Hispanics abuse social services is belied by the data. In late 1997, the Georgia Department of Human Resources reported that immigrants made up only 1.2% of all families receiving TANF (welfare), with Hispanics comprising .7%, and just 1.3% of all families receiving food stamps. And, in response to the continuing immigration debate, the National Immigration Forum calculated that immigrant households typically will pay an estimated \$80,000 more in taxes than they will receive in local, state and federal benefits over their lifetimes. (p. 14)

Their rights are frequently unprotected in their countries of origin as well. On their December 26, 2002 broadcast, *Noticias Univisión*, a Spanish channel news denounced that near the border in Mexico, several immigrants were robbed of their money and presents that they took back for their relatives for Christmas; some were blackmailed by local authorities who required *mordidas* (bribes), and some women were threatened with rape (see also Bustamante, 1997).

The other side of the border is not better. Angry U.S.A citizens patrol the borders in Texas to “stop illegal immigration” (Bustamante, 1997; Beyliss, 2002, p. 18) as astonished immigrants denounce that they are treated as outlaws when they are just taking the jobs Americans do not want. Bustamante pointed out, *El indocumentado cae en un tipo de delincuencia sumamente peculiar; al responder a la demanda de su fuerza de trabajo en los Estados Unidos, cruza la frontera violando una normativa que es legal y socialmente sancionada en los Estados Unidos, pero no en México, en donde ‘irse de mojado’ no tiene ninguna consecuencia estigmatizadora para el trabajador; es tan solo un modo socialmente*

*aceptado de obtener un ingreso que se considera legítimo, tanto como las ganancias obtenidas por quienes lo contratan en los Estados Unidos* [The undocumented worker falls into a peculiar type of delinquency; as s/he responds to the demand for his or her workforce in the United States and crosses the border, s/he violates the law by U.S.A. standards but not by Mexican standards, where to “smuggle in as a wetback” does not create a stigma for the worker; it is a socially accepted way to earn a living; a living they consider as legitimate as the profits their U.S.A. employers make as a result of their work] (p. 59).

Sandra’s assessment of the loss that they all face is powerful, not only because she risks voicing what nobody else in the group dares. It is essential in that it is the commencement of the awakening to and acquiring consciousness about their own de-humanization:

The oppressed. . . . must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanization, which does not lie *simply* in having more to eat (although it does involve having more to eat and cannot fail to include this aspect). The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. (Freire, 1982, p. 55)

*“Yo pienso que eso le afectó mucho a mi niño,”* concedes Zunilda as she realizes the impact of the immigration experience on her child. She believes that such an event affected her child greatly. “He was very scared of the river. He cried so desperately! And it is a trauma, when a woman leaves her husband, the children suffer.”

In her foreword to Igoa’s (1995) “The Inner World of the Immigrant Child,” Alma Flor Ada discusses the hopes that drive parents into the U.S, pointing out that the paucity of the literature on the difficulties experienced by immigrant children and the lack of counseling services specifically designed to deal with the traumas of

immigration suggest that the general public is either not aware or has little concern for the difficulties of the transition immigrant families experience.”

(p. vii)

This is a claim that Guadalupe Valdés (1996) backs up when she suggests that the solution to Latino children’s low achievement in schools cannot be found by looking for scapegoats; rather it is necessary to find what is happening in the lives of the children and act accordingly.

As Zunilda begins to make sense of some of the issues surrounding her child’s struggles with schooling in North America, she also takes the blame. Taking the blame is a form of self-deprecation, which in turn is a result of the oppressed person’s “internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them” (Freire, 1982, p. 49). Because she dared to confront one of her closest oppressors, her husband, by leaving the situation of abuse in which she was entrapped, she feels responsible for the problems her child experiences. She does not ponder how her husband’s alcoholism and his physical and emotional abuse toward her might bear on the mental health of her children. She does not confront her life experiences as those of a person who has been oppressed all her life, arguably due to her lack of awareness of such oppression, characteristic of the oppressed, according to Freire (1982).

The lack of communication in her family coupled with a total absence of affection from her father, initiated her subsequent struggles in life. Yet Zunilda is a fighter, fearful at times, courageous at others, always seeking affirmation from the men in her life: her boyfriend, her husband, and lately, her son. “If I leave your father, would you come with me?” she asked her oldest son (interview transcript), and when he replied that he would not take sides, she stayed.



An oppressed person is one who is deprived of her or his right to be human, to act as human. Zunilda was stripped of those rights early in her life. Denied of her childhood and of her right to make decisions, she entered into marriage a child, without knowing “what life was like.” A lack of dialogue forestalled opportunities for education, including sexual education. Marriage to her was continued oppression and disempowerment. As she described how she was literally “put to trial,” by her in-laws, she begins to question their right to doing so. What is striking is the parallel of her childhood with her life as a married person. “At home, there was no communication between my parents and us.” “There is no communication between my husband and I.” When we meet to establish face-validity on this chapter, Zunilda says,

“I agree with that. I remember the meeting on domestic violence, when the lady who spoke said that people who live in a violent home will be either abusive towards his wife or a victim of her husband. I am scared that my children will do that when they are married, you know, here things are different; they can be put in jail. I tell my oldest son, *Cuando una mujer es maltratada, mejor quisiera ser el perro mas viejo de su casa* [When a woman is mistreated, she would rather be the oldest dog in her house]. (Face validity meeting, July 17, 2002)

Two institutions played a role on Zunilda’s assessment of the problem in her marriage: Church, where she sought to discuss her husband’s alcoholism and her ways of dealing with her children, and school, when we started dialogues to help her child. “When I started to go to church, they began to help me see things a different way. Now I am different with my children, even with the oldest. I do not curse or scream at them as I used to do” (Face validity meeting, July 17, 2002). In her interactions in the school, both, at large group meeting and in the writing group, she also learned of her rights to be treated with respect: “*Yo pienso que (pause) que uno*

*no debe dejar que el marido, nada más porque dice yo soy tu esposo va a hacer (pause) te va a tratar como él quiera.”* [I think that (a woman) should not let her husband (mis)treat her at his pleasure, just because he is her husband]. By observing and listening to her child, she learned about his perspectives and needs, and through our frequent communications on the phone, during her visits to the school, and at our group meetings, we learned about each other and about ways to interact with Alex and to enhance his learning abilities. We learned that everyone has something to teach and that we can all learn from each other.

As in the case of Zunilda, many spouses and partners abuse their Hispanic women. My language brokering in the school, where I translated for Hispanic families schoolwide, provided many opportunities to encounter victims of family violence. Domestic violence is related to patriarchal beliefs about ‘ownership’ of the husband over the body and life of his wife, and a frequent consequence of alcohol or drug abuse. Coupled with traumatic experiences of immigration and cultural shock, domestic violence and substance abuse bear on a child’s learning and on the involvement of parents in the school.

For many children, the trauma of their uprooting is compounded by the perils in their journey to the U.S. For others, the interactions between two of the most important adults in their lives, parents and teachers, makes a big difference in how they fare in school. In the next two chapters, I will discuss schooling and communication in the school (i.e., Hope Elementary) as a contributor factor to their achievement or lack of it. Chapter 5 describes some of the interactions that took place between Ana, the mother of a child who was experiencing learning and behavioral difficulties, and the school. Such interactions developed into a game of moral accountability where the players (school/home) antagonized and pointed fingers at each other instead of reassessing the child’s needs and engage in a mutual (cooperative or collaborative)

game. In chapter six, I exemplify the need for learning together to understand and better guide the children to make the best of their learning potential and experiences.

## CHAPTER 6

### A SERIOUS GAME

*If one had to propose a transcultural definition of excellence, I should say that it's the fact of being able to play the game up to the limits, even to the point of transgression, while managing to stay within the rules of the game.* (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 78)

Young, loud voices coming up the driveway announced the children. Three boys on their bikes, with José standing tall amongst them appeared right before us. “Hello, José...” I started. “Hello,” he said, and kept on going up the hill. For a few seconds I saw the gleam in his eyes as his lips slightly stretched sideways when he heard my voice. Then, the same cold, distant child who attended my classes and ran in the hallways between classes appeared. “Come here, sweetheart. I have something for you.” He kept on riding his bike. “José, José!” shouted the other kids. “Mrs. English has something for you!” The mention of my name forced me to closely look at the children. They attended first and second-grade at Hope Elementary. One of the children pedaled faster and pulled José’s T-shirt. “José, Mrs. English has something for you.” He turned around, ‘standing’ on the bike and rode fast just to stop next to me with a loud sound produced by a combination of the brake from the bike, his foot on the wheel and a quick twist to the side of the front wheel on the pavement.

“I brought you something, dear.” I handed him my present. “Thank you.” Again, that cold body language, yet the same sparkle in his eyes, the same hidden smile. He opened the card and looked inside. “Money!!!” he shouted. “Oh, man! You got money,” I overheard the children say. “Can I get a hug?” I asked, seizing the opportunity to initiate contact with him,

hoping to finally break the ice between us. He put both feet on the sides of the bike and stretched his body towards me. As I hugged him, I could feel the stiffness in his body. “I love you son,” I said. He just let me hug him and took off as soon as I let him go.

“I love you.” I have said that to him several times, although I never got a response. Certainly not the kind of response I expected. Perhaps this invitation to his party was his way of showing that my words and efforts to make him feel loved were yielding results. As I write now, I wonder whether the invitation was his response alone or if it was a combined response from mother and child.

I could not tell whether my heart was beating in time with the sound of the tropical music coming from the garage or because of my apprehension of meeting this family in their own environment. Why was I so nervous? After all, José had loudly asked me to attend his birthday party as soon as he came to my fifth-period class, more than a week ago. I accepted the invitation because I wanted to show support and love to the child, a ten-year-old kid still in third grade who, for the past two years had spent a good part of his time in the school’s front office or facing the wall in a class other than his regular classroom. Bonding with him was neither hard nor easy. After several interactions with school authorities, his mother, and the child himself, I sensed a sort of emptiness in his life that poured through his big, dark eyes. Yet, when I attempted to praise or reassure him in my class by touching his shoulder, his body would freeze stiff, as he said, “Please do not touch me.”

During the first six months of the school year, I did not look at José as a potential focal child for this research. In fact, during my initial interactions with the staff and school administration, they had cautioned me to be especially careful and tactful with his mother. She

was portrayed as uncooperative, sour, belligerent, just like her child. José was not a challenge to me, he was just one of my kids. He was, indeed, one of my most needy kids.

As days went by and I worked towards understanding him, I kept remembering the teachings of my dad, who ushered me through life with compassion and understanding. I remembered our dialogues when he was my mentor as I became a teacher. He underscored a need for understanding without criticism, blame, or second-guessing. He demonstrated by example how to deal with people of many needs and in various situations, and went beyond modeling to help me through our daily dialogues, as I attempted to analyze and make sense of the lives of my students in my native Colombia.

Scholars in the field of multi-cultural education have addressed the need to understand the worlds our children come from. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) pointed out the importance of identifying and drawing on the experiences and resources available at home that enable children to learn, what they called funds of knowledge. Lisa Delpit (1997), James Gee (1996), Sonia Nieto (1992), and John Ogbu (1992, 1994) argued for the existence of particular needs and ways of learning that are culture-specific both in their goals and orientation. Delpit, for instance, stated that a teacher must consider the students' cultural ways of learning when addressing their specific needs (i.e., teaching writing skills to African-American children instead of process writing that focuses on developing fluency, the latter being more appropriate to teaching European American children.) African-American children, she maintained, have fluency that can be observed in such events as their musical compositions. Thus, Delpit reasoned, education into the power codes, including edited English, are necessary in our society and must address the needs of specific cultural groups. Ogbu (1994) contended that academic learning is culture-specific in that it attends to the needs and goals of a particular society,

influencing not only the outcomes but also the process and ways in which that learning takes place. Such is the case in technologically advanced societies in which learning focuses on math, science, and the acquisition of skills to perpetuate and continue to advance that society. Thus, for the children to be competitive in the culture in which they grow up, these two theories ought to be complementary in their education, regardless of their minority status.

In order to understand José's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), his cultural way of learning, and to assess the goals and ways of learning fostered at home and how they compared to my own teaching practice, I had to go to the source. Learning from and with José was the first step, but the equation could not be complete until I established communication with the family and examined learning practices in and outside of my classroom. (Freire, 1998; Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003; Moll et al., 1992, 1994).

The following week, as he came in my class, he blurted out: "My mom said nobody would love you as much as your mother." He sat on his chair and looked as if he did not care for my answer, yet his message was probing, his heart was expectant. "That is true," I replied. "However, it is very possible for others to love you too. Your father and siblings love you, your teachers love you too. I certainly do love you."

Paulo Freire (1998) discusses the element of love in the actions of people who are committed to their professions and causes. Educators within a critical paradigm are visionaries striving for utopias, projects of life<sup>15</sup> for the group in which they immerse. From such a perspective, love is understood as the "liberation of subjects rather than as pathological

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<sup>15</sup> Because people are unfinished products of history and of their own actions, Freire (1982) argued, every human being in a critical pedagogy is a project of life, a human being in the making, learning and acting upon their environment and their daily realities.

possessiveness” (p. 512). Love that gives direction to a humanizing practice that in a circular process departs from an assessment of our daily experiences illuminated by theory and that yield possibilities for *praxis*. Praxis, the relationship between theory and practice that allows for the acquisition of a critical consciousness (conscientization) should be at the center of the educational process, according to Freire. In addition, my love for my students derives from my perspective as a nurturing teacher, which is not to be mistaken for the paternalistic or laissez-faire teacher. As a nurturing teacher addressing the needs of the students, I first must attempt to learn who each of my students is, as my father helped me discover several years ago.

Love was an issue in José’s life. At the time, I did not exactly know why. The child appeared angry and lonely, crying for love and attention. Conflict was evident in many of his actions: “José said today that he doesn’t want a picture of his mother in his notebook. When I suggested to him to put it in, he just said ‘*I don’t want her picture in my notebook!*’ ” The tutor used a dark, low voice when quoting him. “He also told me that he is not being able to sleep because his big brother keeps him up for a good part of the night. He said that his mother came in their room last night and took big brother out of the room” (Field notes, February 11, 2002).

His mother. The person everyone in the school seemed so wary of. The one I had met so many times in the office and accompanied outside when the meetings were over. The person I was now being allowed to see in her own environment in spite of the artificiality of the event. The woman who told jokes, the happy woman who sang and danced with almost every song. As I came into the double car garage, decorated with lights and strips of papier-mâché, she was cordial but cool. “*Buenas tardes, Señora Ana,*” I said. “*Buenas tardes, Ms. Carmen.*” “What a beautiful cake,” I complimented, looking at a big cake decorated with a dinosaur theme. “*Lo hice para José. Me tomó toda la mañana para decorarlo!*” [I made it for José. It took me all



morning to decorate!] She was proud of her creation, more so when an hour and half later everybody complimented her on the taste and smoothness of the cake. “Have a seat,” she invited. “This is José’s teacher,” she introduced me to her guests, as I smiled and nodded at the unfamiliar faces.

Throughout the school year I had heard many negative comments about this “neglectful” mother, who was constantly being referred to the Department of Family and Children’s Services (DFACS) by the school because “her children exhibited behavior problems” that raised concerns in the staff. I must confess that, going by what I had heard, I had begun to believe it.

I still ponder, trying to understand, at what point in time did I let myself be influenced by such perceptions?

I first met Ana when I arrived at Hope Elementary less than three years ago. Because I had worked as a principal in a private school in my country of origin, the administration called upon me to help them mediate with delicate discipline issues and “difficult” parents. Ana had been called to the school several times before I was asked to “mediate” and “appease” her. I called her home and arranged an immediate conference because José had been in trouble on the bus that morning, and I learned that he had been in trouble quite a lot everywhere in the school or school-related settings lately.

“Be aware that this is a very difficult mother,” the administration warned before I made the phone call. “I’m used to dealing with difficult parents,” I replied.

Ana’s guard had gone up when she learned that I was from the school. “¿Que pasa?” [What’s going on?], was her worried question. I replied that there was a small problem on the bus involving one of her children and the principal wanted to discuss it with her. “I’ll be there in five minutes,” she said. When she arrived at the school, she did not smile back when I greeted

her with a handshake. I explained that I would be translating for her, attempting to reassure her. I wanted to convey that she was not alone, that I was going to help her communicate her ideas and solve any problems that should arise at the meeting.

The principal greeted her, inviting her into his office. He sat behind his desk, motioning to Ana to sit by his left side, slightly across from his desk. I sat next to her, while the assistant principal sat next to me and by the office door, which she closed to maintain privacy. By such seating arrangements, I now realize, we established a non-verbal tone for the meeting. Power relations are enacted in several ways, ranging from positioning to discourses and physical punishment (Gitlin et al., 2003) Ana was physically cornered, with the assistant principal near the door, blocking the exit, and the principal behind his desk asserting authority, while I remained physically and psychologically on her side, translating as the administration laid their case.

At our face validity-interview, Ana disagreed with my assessment that she felt cornered at this particular meeting.

“I felt cornered later on, when I went to ask why José was not allowed to finish his CRCT (Criterion Referenced Curriculum Test). When José came home that day and I asked how did it go, he said a teacher sent him to sit away from his test while his classmates finished it. I wondered if the test was important, and so I went to talk with the school and with the teacher. I asked for a translator and they sent another lady, not you. In the end, they changed the subject, saying that José has no manners, that he does not answer when people talk to him. They said the school has been very patient with him and there is nothing else they can do to help him, and so, I asked, *“Entonces, ¿Cuando van a hacer algo, cuando él salga en*

*las noticias como los muchachos de la escuela Columbine?* [So, when are you going to do something, when he makes the news, as did the lads at Columbine?]

*That day I did feel cornered*, emphasized Ana.]

Lisa Delpit (1997) submitted that schools exercise a “culture of Power” in addition to the enacting of power in the classroom that encompasses the existence of “codes or rules for participating in power... (and that those) rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of culture of those who have power” (p. 24. See also Gitlin et al., 2003). Delpit also suggested that learning the rules of that culture “makes acquiring power easier,” and that, “Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 24). However, Freire (1998) discussed a more subtle process for the construction and exercise of power that is validated and made possible only in interactions between two groups: what he called “the masses and the power elites” (p. 508). Moreover, he suggested, through examination of these practices, the dispossessed, or the masses, can gain (cognitive) distance in order to examine mythological explanations of such realities. In so doing, he argued, the dispossessed undergo mental/cognitive processes that enable them to act upon and change oppressive situations through praxis. Thus, a negotiation of the rules and regularities (Bourdieu, 1990) of such interactions, rather than an acritical learning of the rules of the culture of power as discussed by Delpit, would be possible in home/school relationships. In the final chapters of this dissertation I will examine how such learning and negotiation occurred at Hope Elementary School.

The principal told Ana that José had been written up for misbehaving on the school bus. He had slapped a child and refused to obey an order from the bus driver. Ana became defensive, angry. The school has called her so many times lately. She had tried every thing she knew to

discipline José, to make him understand how to behave; yet, the school kept on calling her. The school only saw what José did, regardless of what other kids did to him, she said. I assured her that I had seen and mediated between the school and parents of other students involved in misconduct. I had talked with the children; I had translated notes, and had done with them as we did with her child. Her belligerence and anger settled at this point. She asked to talk with José, who was sitting outside. When he came in, she asked him what had happened. As the child explained the problem, she inquired, “¿*Que te hicieron?*” [What did they do to you?] The child immediately seized on the opportunity to shift responsibility to someone else.

Baker and Keogh (1995) studied identity construction in parent-teacher conferences in a secondary school in Brisbane, Australia, showing how the participants “offer ‘moral versions’ of themselves as parents and teachers” (p. 263). The authors argued that (regular) school-parent meetings “are understood within the teaching profession and by parents as not particularly enjoyable,” (p. 264) as both institutions view each other as challenging their own “moral versions” [and self-perceptions] as parents, teachers, and by extension, administrators. The authors showed that “both ‘home’ and ‘school’ are constructed in the course of talk about a student’s achievements [or difficulties], as idealized courses of morally accountable action” (p. 265). Because José was constantly in trouble, both the school and Ana developed perceptions about each other that pointed to incompetence in doing their respective jobs. Such perceptions set the tone for their interactions, as did a lack of consensus about goals and payoffs in terms of the child. Because José seemed to be a problem for both the school and the mother, all actions had focused on punishment and moral judgments rather than negotiation, thus limiting the possibilities for understanding and remediation of the child’s needs.

Ana went on saying that her child was responding to provocations of other children, that even at church a little African-American girl had slapped him in the face and he didn't respond, but she couldn't tell him not to respond, that he had to take care of himself. As I explained to her that he could count on teachers and administrators to mediate and help the children deal with anger and conflict in a more pacific way, she said that teachers did not pay attention to her child. *"El ha reportado varias veces, pero me dice que su maestra no le hace caso. Entonces qué quiere, ¿que se deje pegar? Pues yo no voy a dejar que él lo haga. Si lo provocan, pues que responda!"* [He has reported several times, but he tells me that his teacher does not pay any attention to him. So, what do you expect, that he lets others hit him? I will not allow him to do that. If he is provoked, he should respond!]

Her words unlocked memories of my own childhood. I remembered my little brother's years in elementary school and my mother's struggle to act as an agent for him. His peers were bullying him and he came home crying one day. When my mother found out that his peers ganged up and hit him, she did not go to the priest director of the Catholic school. Instead, she encouraged my brother to hit back. After a few more 'crying days,' mamma took the belt and spanked him. "So you will learn. You are a man. You must learn to take care of yourself."

Several months after this interaction with Ana, at one of their regular visits to my classroom, the parents of a high-achieving student discussed the school they left in Mexico. "As owners and administrators, we do not have to deal with fights between children, and neither do teachers. The children know well to go to the yard and take care of their own differences. Only if they are getting too rough do teachers intervene" (Journal entry, May 23, 2002). Zunilda, one of the co-investigators in the writing group, assessed one of the differences in schooling practices between Mexico and the United States: "Here, (schools) teach children to be respectful (toward

others.) Not in Mexico. Over there, a child can get into a fight with another student and nobody says a word. At the worst, they would tell him *mira cágate!* [shit yourself] or perhaps they would call his mother, nothing else is done” (Interview transcript).

There is, however, a clear distinction between *darse a respetar*, inspiring respect, and *hacerse respetar*, forcing others to show respect. The former would include the feelings roused by the avoidance of confrontations initiated by the child, while making others to show respect to you means responding to confrontations initiated by others:

Yo hice una travesura a un muchacho, o sea, yo le aventé un mango. ¿Como allá se ven mucho los mangos? Le aventé un mango, y entonces el muchacho le fué a decir al director, y entonces ese día se le ocurre ir a mi papá a preguntar. . . . (al llegar a la casa) me dijo que éso no se hacía, que tenía que respetar a los demás y que si tenía algún problema con los muchachos o lo que fuera, que tenía que reportarlo a en la oficina con el director o algo, o con el maestro, pero que no le anduviera pegando a nadie. [I behaved mischievously towards a boy, that is, I threw him a mango. Because over there you can see many mangos? I threw him a mango, and the boy went to tell the principal, and precisely that day my dad happened to go to the school to ask . . . . -(at home)- he told me not to do that, that I have to show respect to others and if I had a problem with the boys, or whatever, I had to report them to the principal or to the teacher, but I shouldn't be hitting anyone.] (Interview with Fernando (January, 2002), a participant in the large group whose interactions with the school will be discussed in the next chapter).

Ana resorted to a rule learned in her own country that implicitly requires children to assert their “manhood,” to handle their own physical confrontations when such conflict is

initiated by others. Not doing so would result in social disgrace and being labeled as a “wimp.” She did not realize that the game is played differently in America. [During our face validity interview, Ana responded to this analysis by saying, “I hope I am not raising *machos* [male chauvinists]. I told him to defend himself because he has to learn how to do that to survive, not because I want him to become a *macho*!” Thus, to her, surviving in America requires learning how to re-assert oneself, to be able to fight our own battles, to become physical if necessary.]

I translated her angry reply to the principal, and he told her that he would talk with the teacher about José. As I translated back for her, I also added that teaching the child to respond in a confrontational manner would only bring trouble to all, the child and the family. “If the child hurts another student and the child’s parents decide to press charges, you and your husband will be in trouble,” I pointed out. “However, if we can somehow work this out to where José doesn’t hit anyone back but reports any bullying to his teachers, we are going to see to it that justice is done.” I told her that in the event that his homeroom teacher did not listen to his concerns, he could look for me in the school and I would direct his concerns to the teacher or the administration.

By sharing the rules of the game as played in the target culture (Delpit, 1997), I attempted to facilitate her ability to better play the game (Bourdieu, 1990). Although the administrators appeared calm, non-judgmental, I left the office wondering if we all had grasped an accurate perspective of our cultural and linguistic differences, if we really understood and empathized (Swick and Graves, 1993).

Ana left in distress, and I accompanied her outside. As we were passing the office, I could not help but notice concern on the secretary and clerk’s faces. They looked at her and me, and I smiled at them as I kept walking with Ana. Outside of the office, she was almost in tears.

*“Ya no sé qué hacer. Yo lo he castigado, lo he amenazado, le he hablado, pero nada cambia. Ya estoy cansada de que la escuela me llame casi cada dos semanas a ponerme quejas de su comportamiento.”* [I don’t know what else to do. I have spanked him, I have threatened him, I have talked with him, but every thing stays the same. I’m getting tired of being called to school almost about every other week just to hear complaints about his behavior]. I told her that I understood her feelings and asked her if I could do anything to help. She said she would be fine and relaxed a little when I rubbed her shoulder as a sign of reassurance.

Two school years went by and I did more translations for the administration, yet neither Ana nor José capitalized on my offer to help. It was not until we were presented with an unconstrained opportunity to build trust that both mother and child opened up to me and facilitated laying out the necessary game to help the child benefit from his educational experiences.

### *Piecing the Puzzle*

That opportunity came when José entered my ESOL class as a second language learner who struggled a lot. He qualified for services on his last year’s Language Assessment Battery (LAB) exiting scores; however, I retested all my students because I wanted to be able to compare ‘growth’ this year with a new test (level 2 instead of level 1). José did not have many difficulties on the listening comprehension section, but I noticed that he went through the reading and writing sections in less than three minutes each, making random marks on the answer sheet.

After a few days in ESOL, I informally assessed my students’ oral reading abilities and casually asked him to read aloud to me. He turned belligerent, claiming, “I don’t like to read.” I observed him writing and realized that he was focusing on one letter at a time when copying



from the board, and refused to write anything on his own. That same week the group did choral reading, with José repeating after them or joining in a guessing game.

The child was aggressive, cantankerous, uncooperative, loud, and bullying of his peers. Sensing a deeper problem, I slowly began to get closer to him, controlling my Latino temper to be firm yet loving, until the day I confirmed what I was suspecting: he did not know how to read.

Children with learning difficulties have a tendency to call for attention by exhibiting loud misbehavior (Voss, 1993), yet there was more to José's behavior than just an inability to read. It was not until the end of February that I would hold the pieces that lead to a better understanding of the source of his anger and his loneliness.

I re-grouped my ESOL children to start a beginning reading class, with José and seven other boys and girls who were experiencing similar reading problems. I also sent letters home, asking for Ana's help, specifically to make sure that the child practiced letter-sound correspondence. I described the activities that were taking place in my class to her and sent materials home that she could use to help him remember what we were doing in class.

In spite of much criticism of school practices that aim at a reproductive model of parental involvement in which parents are asked to replicate school practices at home (Valdés, 1990), I resorted to this strategy as a necessary step to ensure that the child was rehearsing at home what we learned in class. Ana had shared her assessment about José's learning abilities, that it took him "three or four times the time it takes other children to learn" (Interview transcript, April, 2002). Some other factors affecting my decision were casual observations of José in his regular classroom, where he would spend some time in isolation from other students, working in the computer lab, or "reading" by himself in the library. In addition, interviews with Latino parents that I conducted as part of my pilot study in Colombia and Mexico pointed to the necessity for

clear parental expectations about homework as a condition for children's learning. Further interactions with parents through this school year also revealed a concern about homework, as approximately 95 percent of the calls I received at home and school were inquiries from parents about homework and achievement.

As can be expected, the child had a low self-esteem. In a writing class I asked the children to write something about themselves that was good or that they were proud of. "There's nothing good about me," he said. I sent a letter asking Ana to help José find something positive about himself to share with his peers. The next day he brought his baseball trophy, and with the help of the assistant principal, who that day acted as his writing buddy, he wrote a story which later on he typed on the class computer.

José chose to write a section of his paper about his mother. He shared that she always took him to practice and stayed with her children while they played. She was also there when he received the trophy, "Because I'm good at the bat." After showing so much anger toward his mother, I saw the glint in his eyes as he began to think about some of the things she has done to help him succeed. I was beginning to see the kind of support (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989) available to José at home, a support that did not conform to the negative expectations evinced by his teachers and the school in general (Delpit, 1997; Delgado-Gaitán, 1996, 2000; López, 2001; Valdés, 1997; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2000).

José was aware of his limitations in reading and writing. He was constantly angry in and at the school, associated with several factors, one being his feelings of inferiority due to his level of literacy as compared with his peers. He was also embarrassed, especially when he had to play on the fourth-graders' baseball team because of his age. He did feel comfortable among the group of ESOL beginning readers. The seven children offered each other a non-threatening

environment because they saw themselves as sharing the same potentials and difficulties. For that reason they were not so anxious when they made mistakes or took a long time to learn. But when José was with his tutor after my class and the new group of children arrived in the classroom, he leaned forward and covered up his notebook with his left arm and torso, hiding it from curious glances.

In sharp contrast with Mexican and Colombian schools, mixed-ability grouping based on age prevails in America. Many children are administratively placed who have not mastered the skills and goals they will need to succeed in the next grade-level. Most Hispanic parents are not aware of this practice and see moving up to a next grade level as a sign of the child's academic achievement. Such lack of awareness of the "social promotion" rule based on age causes these parents not to act as agents for their children to help them navigate the system, as will be seen further on the analysis of José's and other children's cases.

Several authors have pondered schools' failure to reach all children. Guadalupe Valdés (1996, 2000) examined school practices that under-teach the children by exposing them to meaningless work and a watered-down curriculum. In spite of my efforts not to be judgmental, I could not avoid wondering when did we, as a school, start to fail José? By learning about his experiences, environment, and concerns, I hoped we could work toward helping him benefit from his tremendous potential, keen observation, recollection of verbal events, and math computation skills.

Several months later, I met with Ana again at the first Student Support Team (SST) meeting we held for José that year. She was withdrawn and excessively quiet as we presented her with our assessment of her child. José had good mathematical skills, but reading was a problem. His homeroom teacher pointed out that he knew the answers even before she read the

options, but two days later, when he was given the same test to complete on his own, he made a 20. We also talked about the difficulties observed by his homeroom teacher and about some of the modifications we had made, including circling tests for spelling, reading his tests to check his comprehension skills, and scheduling him for a beginning reading ESOL class where the focus was phonemic awareness and basic reading skills. I discussed my concerns that his oral English language skills were advanced and that his real problem was reading, as he could not identify any of the letters in the alphabet. Yet ESOL regulations in the state of Georgia that mandate ESOL services for students whose native language is other than English who score below the 25<sup>th</sup>. percentile on the Language Assessment Battery Test (LAB), required his placement in ESOL (Georgia Department of Education, p. 33). In spite of his talents and abilities, his homeroom teacher shared her concerns that behavior was still a problem.

Ana replied angrily that she did not know what else to do.

*DFACS viene a verme todos los dias. Ayer llegaron a verme que porque alguien de aquí de la escuela reportó que José llegó con un ojo rojo y amoratado, y que José les dijo que su hermano lo había golpeado. El es muy mentiroso y por eso me mete en problemas todo el tiempo. Yo ya le dije a la case worker que ya se lo lleven, porque yo no sé que mas hacer. Estoy desesperada, con este niño no se puede!* [DFACS comes to my home every day. Yesterday they came to see me because someone here in the school reported that José came with a red and black eye, and that José told them that his brother had hit him. He is a liar and because of that, he is always getting me in trouble. I already told the caseworker to take him because I do not know what else to do. I am desperate. It is impossible to deal with this child.]

As I finished my translation, an overwhelming silence dominated the room as Ana wiped away her tears, tears of rage, impotence, and confusion.

Ana went on to say that two years ago she had notified the school that José was exposed to lead poisoning as a baby, when the family lived in an old house painted with lead-based paint. Although both of her children were poisoned, the older was able to eliminate the poison from his body in six months whereas it took José longer to eliminate it. The medical people warned her that he would have learning problems in the school. She was also angry because the school did not expedite his SST and said that “they” have told her that it would take a long time for the school to examine his case. She also said that nothing was done to help her child. “*Para reportarme a mi si llaman a DFACS. A ver ¿Por qué no llaman para decir que la escuela no está ayudando a mi hijo?*” [You do call DFACS to report me. Let us see, why don’t you call them to report that the school is not helping my child?]

As she pointed out that *the school* was at fault, we were speechless. After all, stereotypes dictate that Latinos **conform** and **never** question. I assured her that we were now trying to help the child and pointed out that he was in my reading class, that I had sent several notes informing her about his progress and our class activities, and he would learn if she and I agreed to make sure he practiced every day.

My veiled invitation to join in a team in search for answers to José’s difficulties in the school was one of several attempts to facilitate dialogue, conscientization, and praxis among the adults connected with his academic learning. I started by volunteering some suggestions focusing on strategies to play the game, hoping for Ana to let me in and share her views and the strategies she uses at home to help José. I also attempted to lower the “affective filters” (Krashen, 1984) that caused our mutual anxieties (Freire, 1998c, p. 508), shifting our focus from

our moral accountability as mother, teachers, and administrators (Baker and Keogh, 1995) to José as the center of our concerns (Freire, 1998a). Though technically I was part of the *power elite* (Freire, 1998c p. 508) of the school, my ethical responsibility was to the child, thus in playing this game we had to decide what José's payoff was to be, or in Freire's (1992) words, what was the project of life we envisioned for him.

### *Projects of Life*

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire invigorated educational theory with his advocacy of a critical pedagogy centering on the development of the individual learner as an agent engaged in bettering her or his own living situation. To Freire, education ought to encourage and empower learners to improve their lives through reassessing their daily realities, unveiling myths and problematic situations that they would aim to transform through praxis.

Central to this theory is the intellectual and/or university student as teacher or instigator of processes of conscientization. To Freire, intellectuals hold distance from the object of knowledge that enables them to perform specific roles in their interactions with learners. A point of departure and goal in this cyclical process is the ability to envision projects of life, or the human capacity of working towards goals that, Freire argued, distinguishes humankind from animals: "Men can fulfill the necessary condition of being *with* the world because they are able to gain objective distance from it" (1998, p. 499).

Therefore, as an educator I must envision my students as capable learners and attempt to gain perspective on their individual potential in order to discern and co-construct utopias (Freire, 1998a), or projects of life, for my students, their families, and myself. The road to such projects is not easy, as Freire pointed out that, "Each project constitutes an interacting totality of objectives, methods, procedures, and techniques," and that in such processes, intellectuals "must

demand of themselves an imperious coherence. As men they make mistakes and are subject to equivocation, [nevertheless] their role is to seek the most efficient and viable means of helping the people move from their levels of semi-intransitive or naïve-transitive consciousness to the level of critical consciousness” (p. 512-513).

I claim some cognitive distance by virtue of my experiences as a daughter, as a learner, and as a teacher-learner, focused on learning how to learn. I also acknowledge the wealth of experiences accumulated by the parents of my students, and that they utilize such experiences and the theories learned throughout their lives to make sense of their daily realities; however, such a process of understanding is not always conscious nor is it a true exercise of their political options. Popular knowledge (Fals Borda, 2000) is frequently permeated by knowledge imposed on the masses by the power elites, creating mythological explanations that distort reality and assure conformity and perpetuation of disempowerment and alienation.

Dialogical exchanges, interactions with others, offer room to uncover such myths, increasing a potential for the agency to achieve better lives. From this perspective, those who participated in this research became co-researchers, as we all engaged in searches for problems that puzzled us, bringing in our experiences and our wills to learn, to examine our lives, and to generate explanations, all toward the common goal of bettering the realities and practices of our families and ourselves. In my case, such dialogical events were enhanced by theories of the world previously shared by and with my father or learned in academic settings, which shaped my understanding of learning as interactive relationships and led me to study human interactions, specifically parental involvement, using a Bourdieuan metaphor of the game. “You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, and

activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities*” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 65).

Because “all are players in the Game of Life” (Binmore, 1994, p. 4), several authors argue that human relationships can be examined using the “metaphor of the game” (Binmore, 1994; Bourdieu, 1990). All players (should) have a goal and strategies to play the game. Given that in a game the players’ efforts focus on payoffs, a game is fair when all players have similar possibilities and opportunities to win. For a player to have a fair possibility to win, she or he must: (1) be aware of the game that is being played; (2) possess clarity on the payoff; (3) know the rules, including the moves (strategies) available to her and her opponent or her partner contingent on whether the game is competitive or cooperative, and (4) possess the tools, or cultural capital, that would ensure performance in accordance with those rules and strategies, as well as the ability to use those tools in accordance with the moves of his or her ‘opponent.’

Unequal distribution of power usurps people’s opportunities, biasing the game. Vincent (1996) argued that such imbalance of power permeates home/school relationships,

This inequality is seen as stemming from the discrepancy between the professional knowledge of teachers and local government officers, and anyone who does not work in, and has limited access to those spheres. For specific groups of parents, such as working class and/or ethnic minority parents, that discrepancy is compounded by the dislocation between the cultural framework of their own lives and that of the school. (p. 3)

In dialectical opposition to the exercise of power, being dominated paralyzes and blinds; yet it does not strip people of survival instincts. Sensing a moral attack on her role, Ana’s survival instincts dictated that she fight both to reassert her rights as a mother, and to protect her



child. She might not have known how to get the best of such battles, yet she entered them as David fighting Goliath in the biblical passage (La Biblia. I Samuel 17). She had been backed into a corner in which her children hid as she shielded them with her body, in an almost futile attempt to protect them from what she sensed to be a hostile environment. Yet, unlike David, her shots were erratic as she had little knowledge about how to operate the slingshot. Thus, having been unable to defeat the giant, she attempted to play a defensive game using only two contradictory strategies: resistance or assimilation.

Paradoxically, it was through language that she accomplished both: she resisted when she fought back at the meetings, pointing out the unilateral vision of school practices that shifted the blame only to her and her child. She resisted conformity to the norms and regulations of the school when playing the game she was being forced to play:

*“La escuela solo cuenta sobre mi. Nadie habla de lo que los maestros hacen o dejan de hacer. A ver, por qué mi hijo no sabe leer, si el está en tercero? Y nadie, nadie se ha dado cuenta aquí en la escuela!”* [The school only tell (DFACS) on me. Nobody tells them about what teachers do or neglect to do. So tell me, why my son cannot read, if he is already in the third grade? And nobody, *nobody* in the school has realized (that he cannot read)] (Journal notes, date)

Yet, Ana also conformed through a decision to remain silent. She had seen her child bruised because another child had beaten him, yet she was not calling DFACS to tell them about the school. She would argue that nobody understood what a difficult child José was. “He lies, he steals, he is bad.” She went on and on. When I interviewed her toward the end of the school year, she said:

*Quiero que sepa que yo estuve a punto de tomar acción legal. Mi hermana la mas chica, la que estuvo aqui, dijo “tu puedes demandar a la escuela.” Dijo “Tu puedes demandar a la escuela porque ellos han cometido negligencia con ese niño, porque ellos tienen los medios, y la manera de haberse dado cuenta de que el niño tenía un problema”. Nunca ha sido mi intención demandar a la escuela, porque yo pienso en Dios también . Digo no. [I want you to know that I came close to taking legal action. My younger sister, the one who was here, said, ‘You can sue the school.’ She said, “You can sue the school because they have committed negligence with that child, because they have the means and the way to find out that the child had a problem.” It has never been my intention to sue the school, because I also think about God (and) say no.] (Face-validity meeting, April, 2002)*

I tried to ease the tensions by telling her once again that we understood how frustrating it must be to want to be good to your child and to find so much resistance and anger in him. I shared that I too have seen him extremely angry and reluctant to cooperate in class, but that I was willing to try if she would agree to work with him at home. She looked at me, hopeful that a small opportunity could be available to her. “I’ll call you later to see what we can do,” I said. The meeting continued with recommendations for testing and a suggestion to work on behavior/social skills with him.

When I called her later on that night, she sounded cautious again. I asked if I could count on her to make sure that the child did his homework and learned what I was covering in class. She said because she had been a teacher in Mexico, she was already doing that, that she was monitoring his homework, but he could not retain anything. I discussed my plan to start with

learning the sounds of the alphabet and to walk small steps in the beginning until he learned the basics, then to assess him again and decide when he was ready to go a little faster. She agreed, but the conversation was not flowing smoothly, so I ended it quickly.

### *Post Script*

I started this chapter with the goal of showing how empowerment worked for Ana and José. Yet many times I wonder if this in fact was a matter of empowerment for the three of us, or agency, as I realize that I had to work hard with both mother and child, to help them overcome situations of despair and alienation. The thought of the teacher's role assaults and troubles me through the analysis as I realize that what I did as related to Ana and José surmounts the teaching boundaries to become almost those of an involved social worker or maybe a committed Catholic person whose strong beliefs are always in the core of my daily actions. When I think about my audience, I envision committed teachers, those with high values about teaching, and for those who want to become the best teachers for their kids, for their students. As a participatory action researcher, I am committed to facilitate praxis, and so I am as a teacher because of the tremendous responsibility that my job is vesting upon me. I am not teaching for the present: I am guiding learners for the future.

“My mother is very nice now. She has changed a lot lately,” said Jose upon entering my classroom. “Things have changed a lot at home. Even my big brother is nicer now.” (December, 2002)

I moved to a new school the next year of this study. After three months at Hope Elementary in the 2002-2003 school year, José moved from Hope Elementary to the new school as well. A team of teachers was made aware of his difficulties and decided to work together to facilitate his learning. He went to resource classes because he tested as a slow learner. He also

was allowed to attend remedial reading classes, and joined the class of a teacher who worked hard to provide a positive learning environment for all children in her classroom.

In spite of initial resistance to his new teachers' help, a few months after moving to his new school Jose is hugging teachers, sounding out words, and although he feels uncomfortable reading in front of his peers, he faithfully comes to my room at 1:00 every day to read "little books" that we discuss and laugh at. He is helping me remember the joy of children's books, the innocent yet powerful lessons they provide. As I listen to him read, I learn the pronunciation of difficult English vowel sounds and ask him to repeat them for me. As he feels that we both are learning, he takes his roles of co-teacher and co-learner very seriously. In the comfort of his classroom, where his teacher has fostered a welcoming environment for all the children, he appears a different child as he smiles and engages in learning interactions and friendship with his classmates. He has also learned to vent with me and to manage hard situations for a child his age.

Ana started her own bakery business and she regularly takes Jose there to help her. As she encourages him to welcome her customers and to measure ingredients and keep the facility clean, Jose is developing an interest in becoming a chef. At the end-of-the year SST meeting, she smiled and relaxed, chatting and interacting with the teachers in her limited English, as she proudly heard the report on Jose's progress. Having heard him read to her, she knows the child can learn and is now committed to helping him relate learning and work, offering him valuable lessons for his future. Thus, Ana has reflected on her role as a player in her son's game of achievement. In the next chapter, some parents learn with their children and with the staff, as they create new opportunities to extend classroom learning at home and public places.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Un PACTo - A PACT*

*And so, in order to explain the discrepancy between ideas and reality, (...) it is firmly maintained that it is reality that is wrong and not our ideas or system of ideas.* (Donaldo Macedo, 1982).

It is a cold January morning and I am stationed in the main hall of Hope Elementary, doing my morning duty. Mrs. Lynch walks towards me. “Carmen, we will go ahead and start the meeting now. Could you please call the parent and let him know that we cannot wait?” asks the teacher, evidently disturbed by the parent’s tardiness. I look at my watch. “It’s only 7:15 a.m.,” I say. “Yes, but we have to go to class. We agreed to meet at 7:15 to accommodate the needs of this parent, but we cannot just wait until he shows up,” she replies.

I call the father, a member of our parent group<sup>16</sup>, and his daughter tells me that he has already left home. As I walk in the room, the teachers in the Student Support Team (SST) are already discussing the child. The homeroom teacher briefs the team on the child’s difficulties, asking for my perceptions as his ESOL teacher. About three minutes later, a neatly dressed, small man shows in the door.

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<sup>16</sup> All parents in this chapter who were not described in previous chapters participated in our large group meetings and agreed to my use of transcripts and field notes related to them in this study. Their names, as those of most of the parents in the writing group, are pseudonyms.

“*Siga, Señor Fernando,*” I invite him. “*Buenos días,*” he rushes into the room, his face slightly red and short of breath. “Good morning,” answer the teachers at once, three out of five stretching their lips in forced smiles (journal notes, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2002).

McCaleb (1994) submitted that teachers play key roles at facilitating parental involvement, one such role being *breaking the ice* to foster home/school communication. Teachers can either initiate or respond to parent-initiated communications, becoming the face behind the institution, while charged with responding to parents’ calls for information and advice. Constraints imposed by job responsibilities affect their ability to interact with parents, as happens this morning, when the teachers are apprehensive at delaying their return to their classrooms. Aware that some children do not get along well and that a variety of behavior problems exacerbate how they relate to each other, teachers tend to have high anxiety about leaving their classes during working hours (Cohen, Higgins, and Ambrose, 1999). In addition, stereotypes about Hispanic parents that portray them as not concerned about being on time (or perceiving the use of time differently) increase the teachers’ anxieties this morning (Rodriguez, 2002; field notes).

I struggle to soften the words delivered by some of my co-workers as I interpret for the parent, but I cannot shield him from non-verbal messages while he quietly listens to our discussion. “The child is defiant. He does not even look at Mrs. Turner when she is talking to him. *That’s very disrespectful,*” says one of the teachers, as I share that some of such attitudes could be cultural. “Yes, but unless the child answers, there is no way for Mrs. Turner to assess his learning,” she retorts.

Hostility escalates when the parent hesitates on the group’s recommendation to retain the child at the end of the school year. As I inform him about his rights to decide about the

education of his son, Fernando continues to withhold an immediate answer and I suggest that he let us know his decision later. Instead, he asks us what can he do at home to help his child, and we advise him to read with him every day and to talk about homework and school. This morning nothing is said about linguistic differences between home and school, no objections are made to the use of Spanish at home. At our parent-teachers meetings which we have held this year during which I translated for the teachers, I have encouraged parents to engage in learning activities with their child. “We must encourage positive attitudes towards learning, regardless of the language in which we learn,” I have argued. Many of the skills we seek to foster in the children can be accomplished in any language. School-learning focuses on skills and concepts, and thus, children can learn them either in their native language or in the second language, depending on their linguistic development in either language. My experience as a learner of English shows, attaching a label to a concept already learned in my native language is easier than attempting to understand it in the second language.

Fernando attempts to advocate for his child and feels more at ease after my verbal reassurance of his rights as a parent. Later on, when he and his wife agree to an interview, I begin to understand his attitude at this meeting:

*Yo pensaba que nunca, o sea que no les gus [pause] como que no [pause] no había que preguntarles nada a los maestros. Yo nunca vine a la escuela. Y me decían (mis hijos), “No hombre, yo que te voy a llevar. Estás bien espantoso! (risa.) Pero yo he aprendido que si debe uno preguntar, lo que piénsanos que no está bien, hablar. Y eso lo aprendí en las juntas que usted hizo, porque una vez oí que alguien estaba diciendo eso. Y entonces pues también dije, mira es que uno puede también decidir, es derecho de los padres. Porque yo antes, me decían,*

*“Su hijo va a ir a tal parte,” y yo, “Está bien.” Pues yo decía, “No, pues ustedes son los maestros, ustedes deciden.” Entonces ahora, yo se que uno también puede decidir.”* [I thought that never, that is that they didn’t li (pause) that we shouldn’t (pause) we shouldn’t ask questions of teachers. Never before did I come to school. And (my children) used to say, “No, man. I’ll not take you (to school). You are very ugly” (laughter). However, I have learned that one must ask, (we need to) talk about the things we think are not right. I learned that at the meetings you hosted, because I heard someone saying that one day. And so, I said, look, one can also decide, it’s a parent’s right. Because before (the meetings) someone would say “Your son will go to this place (program)” and I (would say,) “That’s fine. You are the teachers,” I used to say. “You decide.” Now I know, we can also make decisions.] (interview transcript, January 2002).

A central assumption in the game of parental involvement is that the common interest (Bartos, 1967) of both parents and schools is the well-being and cognitive, social, and academic growth of the child. Although both Fernando and the teachers expected Luis, the child, to learn, their understanding of what such learning entailed was different. While Fernando expected his child to grow up to be “a good person,” helpful and respectful to others (interview transcript, January 2002), the teachers expected him to respond to the questions dictated by their curriculum and to learn the expected school behaviors that would ensure his “success” as dictated by an external authority (i.e., national and state standards). In addition, what constituted “respect” for the teachers, looking at the teacher as she spoke, was defiance for the family. The seemingly adamant silence of the child was difficult to understand at that time.



Aware of my position in the teaching profession, Fernando uses humor to soften his appraisal of his previous interactions with teachers. The beginning of his statement is hesitant as he attempts to choose his words, leaving several of them incomplete. Yet it is in these half-words where he lets us into a core difficulty in parent-school interactions: attitudes. *“I thought that never, that is that they didn’t (like)... that we shouldn’t... we shouldn’t ask questions of teachers.”* He did not previously interact with the school willingly because he perceived that teachers did not like him to ask questions or make decisions. He did not know that his child has a right to education in America, and that as a parent, he also has the right to decide upon the best educational placement for his child in the school.

The parent group has discussed the education of children in the U.S.A., including academic goals and strategies to help them at home (meeting transcripts, October 2001 through May 2002). This morning, Fernando expresses his interest in being a part of the teaching team, requesting advice for ways to support the curriculum at home. After attending just four meetings in which we had discussed parental roles and rights in the education of their children, Fernando has learned to link theory and practice (*praxis*) and has become an agent for his child, as he asserts his right to decide on his son’s education. Such agency is not exclusive of his interactions with the staff, as our frequent telephone conversations and interview will reveal his commitment to help Luis emerge from the isolated situation in which he is immersed at school.

As the year progressed, Mrs. Turner, who was Luis’s teacher, his parents and I engaged in dialogues to understand the child and to usher him into the world of schooling at Hope Elementary. Mrs. Turner and I visited the family and engaged in written and telephone conversations with the parents two to three times a week. Several times a week, Mrs. Turner and I shared information about Luis and other children’s progress as well as what we were learning

in our interactions with the family and children. This collaboration facilitated understanding of the children's needs, and helped us to encourage them to acquire the goals both their families and the school held, as Mrs. Turner stated during our phone-validity meeting in February 2003: "Once I figured out what (Luis's) problem was, I was able to give him special attention to overcome his fears. I also provided him with constant praise. He opened up to me as we spent one-on-one time and he witnessed our interactions with his parents."

*Praxis* evolves in the interactions of other parents with the school and in their attempts to help their children learn. Some parents approach *praxis* in a timid way, others are more decisive, yet, subtle, as will be seen later in this chapter. A need arises for spaces for adult critical learning to make possible that parents and teachers engage in joint inquiries to make sense of their worlds and that of the children they are responsible for. As both parents and teachers interact they can potentially engage in *praxis* because *praxis* requires reflection upon practice illuminated by theory and, in a cyclical process, leads to the generation of new theories with which to approach the world.

Arturo, the parent of a child who is experiencing learning difficulties in the school, shares his experiences with the staff's attitudes:

*"En el segundo grado mi hijo llegaba triste. La maestra no lo comprendía, lo regañaba. El nunca dice nada, pero yo lo siento. El sentía el rechazo y ahora no, el tiene una actitud diferente completamente y la maestra también. Antes yo cruzaba palabra con la maestra pero eso como que les molesta porque uno es diferente. [When my son was in second grade, he used to come home sad. His teacher did not understand him; she scolded him. He never says anything, but I can tell how he feels. He felt rejected, but now it is different. He has a different*

attitude, and so does his teacher. Before (last year) I talked a few words with his teacher but she appeared bothered, it may be so because we (Hispanics) are different.] (Field notes, April 17, 2002)

Yet, never before did Arturo say a word about his child's sadness. He came to school straight from his night shift many times to attend SST meetings, ready to take in ideas to help his son. A good observer, he knew the child was having learning difficulties in school but he did not know how to help. Arturo attended most of the Saturday meetings and visited my class to observe how I taught the children. He also participated in our Math workshop, which I held upon request of some parents who wanted to "remember how to do math homework because I have already forgotten it" (telephone conversation with Lolita, January 2002). His child's teacher, however, did not open up to the activities in this research, yet I shared information as I learned about Angel with her on a weekly basis.

Fernando, Arturo, and Lolita are from three of the seventeen families who attended at least six of our twelve meetings. Excepting one family (owners of a private school in Mexico), all sixteen families asked for suggestions on how to help their child learn. When they felt that the staff had given up on the child as evidenced by their recommendations to retain or to observe the student for special education, the parents asked instead how could they help. They wanted to be part of the teaching-learning team. They wanted to play the game, but were unsure as to how to do it.

Paulo Freire (1982) discussed the myth of "The Teacher," who acts as a know-it-all and whom (Latin American) families hold up as an authority. Myths are rigid, fixed ways to explain phenomena, stories about the past that are believed by all to be true. Myths represent reality as the product of unchangeable, fixed laws (divine or natural) that cannot be affected or altered by

human agency. “[M]yths are historically developed tales in which there is a mixture of reporting and invention,” argued Roland Champaigne (1992). Myths permeate everyday practices of both, oppressor and oppressed, distorting reality and shifting blames. Such myths contribute to preserving the *status quo*, to dehumanizing situations that generate conformity and compliance, “... to conceal certain facts which explain the way [people] exist in the world” (Freire, 1982, p. 71).

Parents in this research group held the belief that “teacher knows what’s best,” a belief that some teachers’ attitudes towards their children and towards the parents themselves, reinforced. The inability of parents and teachers to communicate in the same language made it difficult to de-mystify such beliefs.

Drawing on a six-year study of parent-student-teacher interactions in British Columbia, Coleman (1998) analyzed how and why parent-teacher collaborations influence student learning. A key element in such collaborations is the “school climate or ethos,” which the researcher described as consisting “in part of shared *beliefs and agreements about practice* which can unite members of the school community and differentiate between schools” (p. 16, emphasis added). Such beliefs and agreements are tacit or explicit components of the school culture and important elements of what some scholars have termed the *cultural capital* expected of children in order for them to succeed in school (Laureau, 1987; Delpit, 1988). According to the theory of cultural capital, for a student to succeed in school, both parents and students need to know the “hidden curriculum” of the school, i.e., norms and regulations that privilege some-specifically white middle class-practices over others, and ensure that family life “facilitate(s) compliance” with teachers’ expectations (Laureau, 1987, p. 73). Included in the school culture is the knowledge to navigate the system (see also Gitlin et. al., 2003). Yet none of the parents was aware of Hope

Elementary School's mission statement (meetings and interview transcripts) nor were teachers' practices attuned to such mission and beliefs (RESA report, November 11, 2002). Even though the school translated its mission and expectations of the students into codes of conduct and discipline, the parents who attended our meetings were not aware of either. The sparse information available to most of them was in the form of non-verbal communication from the staff, and occasional translations at some meetings. Equally, many teachers evinced distrust about the Hispanic parents' ability to facilitate learning at home, under the pretense that they do not speak the mainstream (English) language, a claim refuted earlier in this chapter.

Toward the end of the meeting with Fernando, the team lays down possible dates and times for follow-up, consulting with him on the best date to get together. When he suggests that we meet early in the morning, two of the teachers mumble to me, "Be sure you tell him to be here on time. We cannot just sit down and wait because we have children in our rooms." I do not have to translate. With a low-voice and calm manner, he apologizes: "*Yo les pido disculpas a las maestras por haber llegado tarde hoy, pero el tráfico estaba muy pesado*" [I apologize to the teachers for being late, but traffic was heavy]. He goes on to tell us that, because he is the supervisor of a group of workers about 75 miles from town, he had to drive all of them to work in the morning and then come back for the meeting. He also asks to meet before the twentieth of the month: "*Del veinte en adelante nos supervisan para evaluar productividad, y de eso depende el sueldo del mes*" [From the twentieth on, we are supervised to determine productivity, and our monthly salary depends on that]. The air in the room feels both light and dense as I interpret for the teachers. Fernando's humble, measured reply has a tremendous impact on the group, as we have now turned anger and criticism into understanding and empathy. Now we do not know what to say, how to apologize to him.

Bartos (1967) stated that in “situations in which two persons or two groups find their most dominant interests diametrically opposed [...they still] have some interests in common. But (...) as conflict intensifies, the common interests tend to be more and more ignored and the differences tend to be emphasized (p. 151). Whether intentionally or not, Fernando seizes on the opportunity to lay down his hand, sharing the constraints he overcomes to attend school-planned meetings. By so doing, he challenges the assumptions of the teachers while using a strategy of sharing his conflicting work schedules to obtain an *equilibrium* (McCain, 1994), a better outcome in the hostile game the teachers initiated. That game is better understood in the context in which teachers are forced to operate.

Teachers face constraints that force us to juggle around the clock, contorting to meet all the various responsibilities our job entails (see chapter 3). Parents must also submit to an authority and meet deadlines, and many Hispanics are oppressed and exploited in the workplace, as discussed in chapters 1-3. The livelihood of all depends on our abilities to comply with such requirements. Yet, a “me-first attitude” provoked by oppressive practices upon teachers under the guise of “accountability” shows in several ways (Cohen, Higgins, and Ambrose, 1999) and Fernando is able to read them this morning. Still, many times, Hispanic parents are not aware of such hidden codes in their interactions with Anglo teachers.

*“In middle class groups in this southern area of the United States it is not always necessary to talk. People communicate through looking at each other,”* said a staff trainer during a workshop on poverty in the school district (field notes, January 10<sup>th</sup> 2003). Such secret codes evade “outsiders,” especially when language is an added barrier to communication. It is not until I become aware of the existence of the code that I, as an insider/outsider, try to read such unspoken clues in my second culture and facilitate awareness.

Reading hidden codes requires gathering clues, putting things together. And so, as I interpret for this parent, the words of one of my supervisors begin to make sense: “We are much better now than we were three years ago, when we came to this school for the first time. I remember Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Phelps, when at one of our faculty meetings they said that if Mexicans come to America, they have to learn English” (Field notes, December 21, 2001). That attitude was evident in attempts to silence and control the Spanish language, such as when the school held the first open house in which I participated. Because I was the only Spanish-speaking staff member, the evening was extremely busy for me. In addition to interpreting for parents and teachers, I was being called to help with registration in the office; therefore, I decided to post registration requirements in Spanish on the office window. A few minutes later, I noticed that the sign was down. Puzzled, I went to the principal who said that he had to take it down due to complaints from parents that a language other than English was being used in the school. If we wanted to post a sign in Spanish, they reportedly said, we had to post it in English first.

A second major attempt to silence Spanish occurred when, in an effort to facilitate teacher-home communication, I typed a two-column bilingual weekly report form with Spanish in the first column and the English translation in the second. Within a week, an angry parent took the form to the school Superintendent. As the administrators notified me of the occurrence, they suggested that I write “the English version first, and then the Spanish one,” which I refused in a symbolic act of standing for the culture of the parents and mine, as well as for their right to communications in their home language (Faltis, 1997; Walsh, 1991).

While at the school and community levels Hispanics were considered with some hostility, efforts were being made at the school-district level to foster parental involvement of these

families. “We will not be able to help the children until we reach their parents,” said the ESOL Coordinator at one of our county-wide meetings where teachers brainstormed about ways to “involve parents.” The focus was on “educating” Hispanics through parent workshops, to remedy the “deficiencies” these parents had: lack of knowledge of the system, inability to be effective parents, low educational levels to support their children’s learning, and lack of manners. These recommended actions, a “top to bottom” or transmission model of education, focused on the acculturation of students and families in opposition to interactive, cross-cultural learning (Field notes, January 28, 2002).

Thus, several models of parental involvement subsumed district-wide practices. At the school level, some of the staff practiced a protective model (Swapp, 1993) that attempted to keep parents at bay, while other school personnel acknowledged and welcomed parents to support the school, in the way of school-wide activities such as fund-raisers and attending PTO meetings. At the administrative level within the school, efforts were made to welcome parents as volunteers in the classroom, albeit, limited to making copies for teachers (Epstein, 2001; Moles, 1993; Gordon, 1979) and to facilitate communication between the school and families through written and oral translations. Both the principal and the assistant principal indicated an interest in finding new ways to foster a better school and home learning environment for the children, developing educational plans with teachers and establishing communication with the parents.

Within the wider community, Hispanic parents were viewed as intrusive and efforts were made to keep them out of school events and decision-making, as evidenced by a reluctance to allow the use of Spanish for school-related events. While Anglo parents exercised their citizenship by voicing their concerns and influencing school decisions (Vincent, 1996), Hispanic parents were banned from participating in the same way. Many Hispanics were afraid of such



interactions, attributable to their limited or non-English proficiency, their not knowing the American public school system, and to their previous experiences in schooling and with migrating to the United States.

At the school-district level, in the English as a Second Language program, parental involvement of Hispanic families was seen as a necessary component of the child's learning; however, efforts were geared toward acculturating the families (Vincent, 1996) rather than toward a critical model designed to empower all actors in the process. Such an empowerment model (Delgado Gaitán, 1990) is grounded on critical education (Freire, 1982) that fosters cooperation, action, and reflection, to generate theory for action. In an empowerment model, all participants learn together, analyzing their own practices, and produce joint knowledge to understand their lives and to act upon them.

#### *Back to Basics: Learning through Playful Inquiries*

Simultaneous translation, or switching between English and Spanish, is a demanding task. Not only must the interpreter be knowledgeable about both languages, it is also necessary to understand meanings, conventions, and how to negotiate languages to convey the intended meaning. As I translate for Fernando and the teachers, memories of my first interactions with Luis keep surfacing, yet I make a concerted effort to push them away. It is not until I write the event in my journal later that night that I start to question and attempt to make sense of the child's situation (Richardson, 1994).

I remember Luis as the little boy who would not speak to anyone or even look up when spoken to. When any adult in the school talked to him, Luis assumed a fetal position, crouching down, elbows on his stomach, burying his face between his fists. I remembered his begging, conciliatory father trying to negotiate with the child to stay in school while looking at me, in

silent request for help. I remembered the mother, always quiet yet loving towards the child, making efforts to free herself of the firm hold Luis got of her clothing every time his parents were ready to leave.

“Please, send him by bus. Do not bring him to school or he will continue to behave this way if he sees you here,” said a first-grade teacher. The comments after the parents left were acrimonious, sour. “These parents should just let the child come by himself. They baby him too much.” It took several days and my promise that I would make sure that Luis got on the bus with his brother every day to get the child to stay.

Luis did not speak to any adult during his first two years in the school. The teachers took this behavior as a normal part of his process of adapting to school, often referring to his language proficiency as the cause behind his “shyness” (Krashen, 1982, 1989). During his first two years at Hope Elementary, I taught ESOL in the upper grades (fourth and fifth), and thus I had little interaction with the child or his parents. During data collection for this research, he attended third-grade ESOL classes with me.

Luis’ stubborn silence persists and his homeroom teacher approaches me to discuss him often. We are both closely observing him and gathering work samples and anecdotal records. “Do you think there’s a language barrier here?” asks Mrs. Turner. “When I talk to him, he doesn’t answer. He just looks down and remains silent, yet I have seen him interact with other students.” Her classroom is inviting, her attitude reassuring, loving, and peaceful. In spite of that, she is not getting closer to Luis, and so when he comes to ESOL, I decide to take a slightly different approach.

“María N.,” I call, as I attempt to learn the names of the students on the roll. As the children answer, I make a quick welcoming comment for each of them. “Luis X.” The child

looks down as his peers nudge him to answer. “I know who you are,” I say. “Do you know that my father’s name was Luis?” The child looks up in surprise, as I smile at him. By sharing personal information about my father, something as simple as his name, the child’s affective filter (Krashen, 1982, 1989) begins to lower.

After calling the roll, I tell the class that I expect answers when I ask questions, especially in math. Stating my expectations was a tactical move to resemble the directive teaching style I have experienced as a student in my native Colombia, the same style that I witnessed when visiting several schools in Mexico during my pilot study. Further interviews with parents confirmed such appreciation of teachers’ “authority” in the classroom:

My teacher told me to be part of the escort to the flag at the school’s honors celebration. I did not want to do it because I was very shy, and he told me that I had to do it. *“I’m the teacher and you are the student, so you will have to do it,”* he told me. I held him in high respect because he was very strict with us.

(Interview with Fernando, January 2002)

I give children a choice to answer in English or Spanish, yet Luis chooses to signal the answers to math problems with his hands. I learn to make a game out of this behavior and at times, I ask the kids to “show their answers under the desks,” signaling with their fingers the numbers that answer the addition and subtraction problems. Thus, the children are teaching me how to facilitate their learning and join in as we acknowledge and validate their ideas (Freire, 1982).

Luis understands English well, yet he lags behind in reading and writing. His homeroom teacher provides him with materials and opportunities to learn, but he refuses to collaborate with her. He seems to be more at ease with me, and so, consulting with the school administrators, the

ESOL district coordinator, and the parents, we decide to place him in three segments of ESOL, vocabulary development, math, and reading. In addition, I start conversations with his parents, who attend every meeting planned in the school.

I call Luis' parents every week to report his progress. Anita is shy and reserved, and so is Fernando; however, he overcomes his shyness to talk with me on the phone. His main concern is Luis' behavior: Is the child minding? Is he doing what teachers are asking him to do? Valdés (1996) documented similar parental concerns among parents in her research. With every update about classroom events, I slowly invite the parents to focus on the child's learning, and invite them to initiate our conversations (Coleman, 1988). Fernando begins to call me at home and to visit the school to talk with Mrs. Turner.

Soon Fernando devises ways to help his child at home. His strategy is simple, yet intricate: fostering love in his child, both family love and love for learning (Coleman, 1998).

The family engages in a routine of spending time together, helping and creating support for each other's learning (Vygotsky, 1997) through play. Fernando takes on the responsibility to assist the children with schooling while Anita observes them from the kitchen as she prepares dinner. He discloses to the children that he wants to learn English with them, and they all engage in games to acquire vocabulary. "I play mostly with the two youngest children; the others are already grown and they would not enjoy playing children's games," shares Fernando. His two youngest children are both in third grade; however, Manuel—who is the older and was retained in the third grade—is not experiencing academic problems, reported his teacher. "I tell the children, let's see who can write the most household items in five minutes, focusing on one room of the house at a time," shares Fernando. "I always lose and the children laugh." Through their play, all are learning. They learn words; they learn how to read, how to write, and how to learn

together. Yet, the main lessons are lessons of love, of persistence, and faith (“curriculum of the home,” Walberg, cited in San Diego County Office of Education, 1997). Such lessons show that learning is fun, purposeful, and that all, regardless of age, are capable of learning (Freinet, 1978; Freire, 1982). Because of these playful inquiries in which his family engage at home, Mrs. Turner and I theorized, Luis’ responds better to games in the classroom, allowing us to better assess his learning progress.

Fernando takes on opportunities to play and learn with his children at home and during family outings. He has learned that helping children make connections with the real world is an invaluable opportunity to facilitate learning (Coleman, 1998; Dewey, 1938/1997; Freinet, 1978; Voss, 1993). *He is not teaching the children, they are learning together* (Freire, 1982). In a society that values education and that requires people to master certain skills to survive, Fernando has learned from his own needs, and is passing that learning to his children. Just as Fernando, other parents in the group are also learning from each other, committed to helping their children succeed:

The other day, I was reading [Alex] a book and I remembered what we talked [about] in our meeting: that we can exaggerate when we read to the child. We read a book that talks about a caterpillar that tickles a leaf. When Alex saw me [acting the book] he was mesmerized. “*Ay mami!*” he said. I believe that’s what is lacking for him, that I devote time to share with him (Zunilda. Interview transcript, May, 2002).

Arturo also shares his experiences with his son, who was initially believed to have a learning disability that made it very difficult for him to learn:

At home I read to him in Spanish, to see if that will help him learn, and he becomes interested. *¿Eso dice ahí, papá?* [Is that what that says, daddy?] *Sí, mijo. Eso dice aquí.* [Yes, my son. That is what it says.] *Entonces, ¿eso es lo que las letras dicen? ¿Lo que la gente habla, eso es lo que escriben allí?* [So, that is what the letters say? What people talk, is that what they write on there?] He asked me, and I said, “Yes, that’s it.” (Phone conversation, March 2002)

When at one of our parent meetings Arturo heard about the possibility of reading with Angel in Spanish, he looked up in surprise. “I thought we are not supposed to study in Spanish,” he said, and immediately started to read and to do math with his child in their native language. Through his persistence, Arturo has helped Angel to discover the relationship between print and oral language, a milestone in the literacy development of the child. Because at some of their previous meetings, the staff warned him not to entertain literacy activities with his son in Spanish, Arturo missed many opportunities to help his child. Only when the group discussed our goals for the children (Parent meeting, February 2001) and our rights to preserve our cultural roots while encouraging bilingualism in the children did Arturo resort to his cultural background to contribute to the education of Angel.

### *Supporting Children*

As the parents share their experiences, they reveal one important aspect of their interactions with the child: reinforcing the curriculum by connecting school to daily life (work, driving, shopping, budgeting) and generating new situations and opportunities for problem solving (Voss, 1993). Though this approach of parents reinforcing of the school curriculum has been criticized (Valdés, 1996), it is important to underscore that not only do parents reinforce the

curriculum: they extend it beyond the classroom and model attitudes about learning to their children.

When in the group we talk about and observe how we support the child, we learn from and with each other (Freire, 1982), in tune with participatory action research assertions about a *popular knowledge*, or base knowledge that is rooted in the daily experiences of the community. Learning together implies codifying and de-codifying the matter of our concerns, of our analysis, to uncover contradictions and potentially oppressive situations. We realize that language can be an asset or a limitation, depending on how we want to see it, and it is up to us to take upon the challenge of educating our children while validating our cultural heritage.

Learning is not a limited privilege of the parent group. It is also open to the teaching team. And as I discuss such learning with classroom teachers who are interested in hearing about it, some teachers question their own backgrounds and readiness to work with Hispanic parents. They also integrate our evolving knowledge into the individualized instructional plans of the children, as Mrs. Turner stated (see pg. 179).

The parents know that they are free to observe my class and to stay during my planning or lunchtime to discuss any issues that concern them, a kind of involvement that Swapp (1993) described as two-way communication. While this gives them access to content and methodologies in the classroom, I too learn from them as they interact with their children (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990). I learn of Arturo's directive teaching style, telling his son every step for problem-solving or how to interpret what they read. My new challenge is to find a way to merge his teaching style with mine and to demonstrate my understanding of how to develop opportunities for independent learning and curiosity, the theoretical and practical knowledge about learning that I have acquired in my life without forcing either upon the parent. As Alex

pushes himself to “show” his mother that he is a capable reader every time she visits our class, Zunilda and I learn about his hunger for attention, about his eagerness to do things with both his parents “like a family” (Interview transcript, May 2002).

Still some of the most powerful lessons we learn through journaling and interviewing: “I believe that Luis’ difficulties are inherited, they run in my family. I have a sister who was slow for everything in the school, just as Luis is,” says Fernando. “I tell him (Fernando) that that also runs in my family. One of my brothers is like that too,” joins in his wife Anita. “My brother was retained three years in the first grade and he never learned to read or write.” The parents struggle to find a cause to their son’s difficulties in school, resorting to a long held myth among my co-researchers that learning abilities are inherited. Yet, as the interview with Luis’ parents progresses, we uncover an interesting occurrence before the child entered Hope Elementary, which is the only American school he has attended: “He wasn’t slow in Mexico. He would bring his work home to show me what he did,” recalls Anita. Fernando adds, “I lived by myself (in the United States) several years, so when I called home, I used to talk mostly with the little one”.

When the family moved here, I taught Luis. I used to tell him that he had to pay attention, true? That he had to be aware of where to go in and how to get out of the school so that he wouldn’t have a hard time [finding the exit doors]. “*Porque yo le ponía un ejemplo, que cuando yo entré a trabajar en una pollera, y como toda la gente se parecía, no? Como estaban vestidos iguales, yo me perdía, en el lugar ya no daba, porque no prestaba atención.*” [Because I used to give him an example, when I started working in a chicken plant, and as everybody dressed in the same way, they looked alike, I used to get lost, and I could not find [the exit door] because I did not pay attention]. And so, I used to tell him, that because he



was a small child he was likely to find the same problem. “Be aware where do you get off the bus, where do you go [to school] and how are you coming back,” I used to tell him (Interview transcript, date).

Through this communication with his parents, Luis’s behavior got into focus as we realized that the child was scared, that his clinging on to his mother’s dress during his first weeks in school was a result of fear and anxiety, not just a temper tantrum as some teachers, believed. Yet, he did not lower his affective filter (Krashen) until his parents initiated and sustained communication with his teachers, until we became a team and expressed our mutual goals for him.

#### *PACTs of Love*

The school district is now focusing on a family literacy program to enhance learning opportunities for minorities. The program follows the National Center for Family Literacy model and addresses four building blocks: adult education; parenting; Parents and Children Together (PACT); and early childhood education.

Parent-child interactions are the heart of family literacy services. Described in many programs as Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time (as conceived by the National Center for Family Literacy), these interactions bring parents and children together to work, play, read, and learn . . . . In family literacy programs, parents learn new ways to interact with their children by attending parent education sessions to guide their developing skills. By increasing the quality of their interactions, parents and children also strengthen their relationships (Kelly, in press) [National Center for Family Literacy, 2002, p. 120].

According to this model, PACT seeks to enhance parent-child interactions to foster the child's learning while *teaching* parents how to develop their child's learning. Through our interactions in the group, we added a new dimension to PACT, making it an opportunity for parents, children, and teachers *to learn* with and from each other. I benefited at a professional level by learning new ways to enhance the students' learning experiences, and at a personal level by earning friends who showed me other ways of doing things and learning, as well as a world of humility and simplicity that enhanced my personal life and fulfilled my professional practice.

PACT can be conducted at home and fostered in the school. The acronym PACT entails a philosophical underpinning for what parent-child-teacher relationships ought to be: Pacts to facilitate mutual learning and true participatory processes to benefit all. In fact, interactions with the parent group in this research did not start until we already reached a tacit pact, clarifying our mutual goals and learning together the rules by which we needed to play while making new rules as we went. Working with parents, inquiring together, helped us both to understand the child and to explore the perplexing issues in our lives and the lives of the children.

The parents wanted to work together because we had a common interest and love for their children. We built on that mutual trust at formal and informal meetings. In addition, we set out to fine tune the goals that they, as a parents, have for their children with my goals as an educator and with those of the school. Such goals are characteristic of every family and specific for every child. Goals evolved from our mutual observations of the children, reformulated as we learned more about the learning environments in which they function, as Arturo stated in a phone conversation we sustained in April 2002:

To be honest, at the beginning of the year I didn't have any interest in my child's (schooling). And that is because sometimes we, parents, *no tenemos el valor* [we

do not have the courage], we do not know how things are here. I was not interested. I thought that we had to teach the child *las cosas de la casa*, house things, to be a good person, polite, respectful of others, and to get along well with others. However, I saw your interest and the need that I help my child, because if I do not help him, my child will not know any thing. After we discussed the “Parable of the Eagle” (Agreey, n.d.) at our first meeting, I started to change. I began to become more interested in my child, trying to help and teach him. Honestly, before the meetings I didn’t worry but then I realized that I too had to study, and I joined an ESOL class, *asi que cuando yo termine, ya vamos a ver que mas hago* [so, when I’m done studying (English) I will see what else to do].

Therefore, in our mutual search for answers, we did put into perspective the tenet that survival in any society is correlated to learning.

As we researched as a group, I found out that parental involvement is facilitated by building personal relationships with the parents. We continue our communications, enhancing our knowledge to talk and to interact with the children in various ways. As Ana and Angélica pointed out at our last meeting, I’m the insider, the person who helps them understand and learn what the school is doing and what teachers expect parents to do. I am the one who can portray a picture of their children in school that will allow parents to continue to redirect their efforts to help the kids achieve goals, as they, the parents, observe, learn about, and share with the group their child’s interests, abilities, skills, and difficulties.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE GAMES WE PLAY

*From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love. (Freire, 1982, p. 24)*

The ability to play a game is a factor of one's awareness of the game itself, of other players, and of the strategies available to all. It also depends on the perception by the team about a player's competency to join in the pursuit of their common goals.

There are at least two types of games in which strategy applies differently: In the first, the players do not communicate and thus, they make their moves in isolation from one another, as in the case of war games (and as happened in Ana's case, presented in chapter 6). In the second type, the player makes her move after observing the moves of her adversary, such was the case of Fernando, described in chapter 7. In the following pages, I will analyze these and other games played at Hope Elementary in more detail.

A lack of communication yields games in which the players engage in isolation, or generate isolated, intuitive responses to their opponents' plays, such was the case of the "moral game" of shifting responsibilities towards other players (i.e., "accountability"). In chapter 6, we saw Ana playing a moral game in which the school held her accountable for the "ill education and manners" of her child, and Ana shifted the blame on the school for not "having taught" José. Although she attempted to engage the school in a game to help the child, the school ignored her. They did not want to play. Ana went along with this game, reduced to that of disciplining the

child, and played it by instinct, until José called for attention and made it possible for a new game to get started.

Communication is a factor of at least two skills: ability to communicate in the same language, and knowledge of pragmatics as understood and used by the players. In many cases, few parents and staff shared a language. Their perceptions of each other as a player/nonplayer in the game forced them to attempt their goals in isolation from one another. In addition to linguistic and pragmatic differences, neither player appeared knowledgeable about the other's strategic repertoire. While parents attempted communication with the staff, willing to follow their recommendations and "learn from them" (interview with Angelica; responses to writing prompts at general meetings), many teachers found it an additional unwanted responsibility and a burden. Nevertheless, some teachers were willing to learn with the group of co-researchers, though their participation in our group processes remained "in the shadows."

In addition to avoiding the game, one of the difficulties I perceived in the interactions between Ana and the school was lack of communication. She insisted she had asked the school to test her child, and that she entertained conversations with her husband about the difficulties José experienced. Yet, she reported, the school did nothing to help him. Because Ana communicated orally, often with the help of a translator, no documentation was available to confirm her claims. As José entered my ESOL class and quietly screamed for help, my ethical and professional responsibility caused me to mediate between school and the family, advocating for the child. I believe that my persistence was vital in the actions the school undertook and played an important role in José's academic advance. Thus, the game for Ana, which in the beginning was a game of avoidance and moral accountability, turned into a more controlled game in which a mediator insisted in keeping it going, always with the child's interest in mind.

My role in this game was to oversee that every effort was made to help José; yet, he did not show much progress at Hope Elementary and so, when Ana found out about a new option available to him, she requested a transfer to the school in which I am presently teaching. The principal in this new school agreed to an individualized plan in which José received remedial reading education where he learned the basics of reading. Aware of his difficulties, his fourth-grade teacher has made accommodations for him, yet she encourages him to continue to perform high in those areas in which he has the ability and the skill, such as math and recollection of facts and details when he is read to. I continue to mentor him once a week, encouraging him to read and write. The instructional conversations he entertains with his teacher, discussing his potential vocational future as a cook, starting his own bakery, are being extended at home, as his mother ushers him into the world of work.

### *Defensive Games*

A lack of communication generates other possibilities for the game, where the player does not know what the actions of the opponent are, nor what strategies are available to either of them. The players could choose strategies in a “rational” way, that is, considering (1) all possible plays available to her or his opponent as well as (2) the “rationale” behind the opponent’s possible choice, then selecting the best move (play) to ensure his or her own maximum gain or minimum loss, i.e., non-tangible rewards of accountability and power. The strategies are a factor of knowledge of the game as it is played, that is, knowledge of the rules and movements allowed the players. A classical example is Albert W. Tucker’s “Prisoner Dilemma” (1950), which posits a hypothetical situation wherein two burglars must decide separately whether to confess to their crime or not. If both deny the crime, they will spend one year in jail for an unrelated crime of possessing a concealed weapon. If they both confess, they

will serve 10 years each, but if one confesses and the other denies his part in the burglary, then he who confesses will go free while the one who denied his crime will serve twenty years (McCain, 1999). The corollary of this game, McCain argues, is that “individually rational action results in both persons being made worse off in terms of their own self-interested purposes [and that such a realization] has made wide impact in modern social science” (p. 6).

Chapter 7 presents examples of the second type of games, in which the player makes his move after observing those of his adversaries. To play the game, however, Fernando had to learn beforehand that he has a right to do so. Yet, the other players [who for the most part chose to be his voluntary “adversaries” instead of his teammates] were also constrained by their responsibilities and their preconceived views about Hispanic parents. A reassessment of the game by two of the players, parent and homeroom teacher, allowed them to view themselves as members of a team and to focus on the payoffs they sought for Luis. They relied on me to translate and learn throughout the process, both during their frequent parent-teacher meetings and through my briefings about my interactions with them individually.

### *Public Games*

Because the players did not share a language to mediate their communications, the school needed personnel to bridge such differences; however, receiving and delivering messages in two languages requires training to avoid miscommunications such as those Fernando reported, and those which I observed first-hand:

Once, I called the school to ask permission for my children to be absent because I needed to take them to the dentist. Nobody in the school spoke Spanish, and so they put a fifth grader on the phone, to translate for me. I could not understand

what the child said, and so I went to the school myself and tried my best to let the office staff know what I needed. (Interview with Fernando, January 2002)

The school district acknowledged such linguistic challenges and addressed them by creating a parent-liaison position at key schools with larger Hispanic populations. Though the main responsibility of the new staff member was to bridge home/school communications, the parent liaisons regretted a lack of training or mentoring at the outset of their work in the schools, making it difficult for them to collaborate with teachers (Journal notes, March 2002). In addition to the parent liaison, other staff members helped with translations, such as bilingual Anglo teachers, teacher aides, and a migrant worker.

Some parents viewed the school as indifferent towards the needs of children and families, and racist:

*Yo si he visto que en esa escuela son muy racistas. Hay muchas cosas que hacen que son así, como racistas pues. Y yo la veo a usted que se preocupa y se afana, que trata de que todos los padres aprendamos y que sepamos como ayudarles a nuestros niños, pero usted es la única. Nadie mas lo ha hecho, y si usted no lo sigue haciendo, nadie mas lo va a hacer. Allí a nadie le preocupa que los padres aprendamos con los hijos, solo usted.* [I have seen that in the school they are racist. Many things they do show racism. And I see that you worry about the parents, that we learn how to help our children, but you are the only one who does that. Nobody has done it before, and if you do not continue to do it, nobody else will. Nobody worries if the parents learn with our children, only you.] (Arturo, April 2002).



In absence of a language to facilitate understanding, the players resorted to mythical explanations for the strategies used by other players. While the parents in the group viewed the staff members' plays as discriminatory and racist, the teachers believed the parents to be insensitive, uncaring, and neglectful (Delgado Gaitán, 1990; Valdés, 1994; Vincent, 1996). Such an absence of a link to bridge linguistic and cultural differences contributed to an unwanted game, that of the players judging each other, observing the other players in isolation from them, and resorting to holding them morally accountable for achieving (or not) the goals of the game.

Thus, a vital component in cooperative and collaborative games is that of communication, which is mediated by language. In the case of the parents and students in this research, language is a tool for academic learning and for interactions with the staff. It is also an instrument to maintain the integrity of the Hispanic family, concretely, the authority of the parents and the values and mores they bring to the task of rearing their children. Additionally, Catherine Walsh (1991) pointed out, language is an element of identity and a mediating tool between society and the production of knowledge and values. Language is rooted in social processes and is shaped by social conflicts and historical forces. Language is at the core of parental involvement, whether it is language that facilitates, or language that silences and marginalizes.

### *Private Games*

A few teachers in this study showed an interest in the living conditions of the children and did something to help, extending their teaching roles to help the families navigate the system, for example, referring them to community institutions that provide health services, food and housing to people in need. Even fewer teachers found the time, energy, and interest to learn

with the group as we developed our theories about our new society and of the responsibilities and rights that it both imposes and grants upon us.

The parents in this research wanted their children to become good citizens, sympathetic and empathetic towards their fellow citizens. Education is important to these parents, as they envision their child holding “good jobs” that are not as demanding of their physical energy as those the parents presently hold, and graduating from school, ready to embark on a career of their choice:

*Y yo quiero que él, no que sea el primero en su clase, pero de 18, yo quiere que él sea el tercero, o el cuarto. Mijo dice que quiere ser veterinario, y pues, por mi voluntad, él va a estudiar. El va a poder hacer lo que él quiera, sea veterinario o otra cosa. Si me llego a quedar en éste país, que no es mi pensamiento, él se va a recibir en algo. [I want for him (my child) not that he is the first in his class, but out of 18, I want for him to be third or fourth (in achievement). My son says he wants to be a veterinarian, and by my will, he is going to study. He will do whatever he wants to do, either to be a veterinarian or something else. If I decide to stay in this country, something I am not thinking of doing now, he will graduate in a career].* (Phone conversation with Arturo, May 2002)

The group of parents shared some strategies to play the game, e.g., using dictionaries to access the English code, as suggested by Arturo; modeling to the children as shared by Zunilda; holding high expectations and ushering the child through positive reinforcement, as Ofelia advised; suggesting the dual characteristic of learning and teaching, as Fernando recommended. Other recommendations included using Spanish to facilitate learning of concepts, while Ana recommended controlling the children in his or her choice of friends and to be aware of the

friend's family background. Nevertheless, Ana appeared to continue to view academics as a function of the school, a responsibility vested upon teachers, and exercised little agency to ensure that her child practiced at home the sounds and readings he was learning at school. She did, nevertheless, extend opportunities to learn, especially as she exposed José to the world of work, making connections between math and cake-making. She reported that she discussed the relationship between reading and job skills with José, yet she repeatedly voiced her frustration when the child did not mind her to practice reading at home.

In addition, the parents wanted to learn about resources and strategies to play the game, for as they realized, education in their country of origin has a different value *and use* than the values and uses it has for people in the U.S.A.

In México it is really hard to study past the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Schools are usually far away and most people do not even have a bike to go to a nearby *rancho* to attend school. In addition, people worry about having food to eat rather than going to school, especially when we *know* that schooling will not help us to get better jobs.

(Conversation with Julian, March 2002)

Some parents engaged in games to enhance their child's learning at home, such as those described by Fernando and Arturo (chapter 7). A common strategy was that of acknowledging the child's ability to speak English and their capacity to become a partner in learning and teaching. Although this view still alters the authority pattern of the families, it served to challenge the child's view of their parents as incapable of guiding them in their academic learning, shifting it towards a perception of their authoritative versus authoritarian individual abilities in each language and of the value of Spanish as a vehicle for learning. The game

became interactive and cooperative as the players learned that teaching and learning are complementary and necessary functions in the process of learning.

### *A Social Game*

Choices often depend on known actions by the opponent, as is the case in cooperative and coordination games in which communication is possible, even though the strategy an opponent might choose to initiate may not be immediately available for examination. That is, player X makes a play after player Y makes hers. A player in such a game might reason: *I want to make the best of this game, but my payoff depends on whether your play goes along with mine or not. If it does not, we both lose. If it does, we both will gain, but I still want to gain more than you do, for I want to be the winner of this game* (for a detailed discussion see McCain, 1999; Binmore, 1994). In the case of parent-teacher interactions such as those described in chapters five and six, payoffs depend on values and social rewards and so, the players *might* reason in this way:

[Parent A] *My child needs to go to school and to become a productive citizen and a good person (payoff) and for that, she will have the help of her teacher in the school to learn in the mainstream language (English.) I will attempt to communicate with the teacher to learn how is my child behaving and if she is working in class.*

[Parent B] *My child needs to go to school and to become a productive citizen and a good person (payoff) and for that, she will have the help of her teacher in the school to learn in the mainstream language (English.) Because I have attempted to communicate with the teacher and we do not speak a common language, I cannot do anything to help my child to learn academics. I would like to maintain discipline at home to ensure that she will become a good person, but I*

*am afraid that, should I discipline her as I learned in my home country, I will get in trouble with the law. Therefore, it is now the school's task to educate my child.*

[Teacher A] *This student is a second language learner and it can be difficult for her to understand what we are studying. Her parents do not speak English, but they have approached the school to learn about the progress the child is making. If I find a way to communicate with them, we may be able to start a game in which the payoff will result in better opportunities for the child. In the process, it is possible for the parents and for me to learn, so that we can apply such learning to future interactions with children.*

[Teacher B] *This child cannot speak English well, and therefore, she is incapable of learning. Her parents keep on showing up in the school, but they do not know what is going on. They do not speak English, and so, it would be a waste of my already scarce time to attempt to communicate with them. I know the child's scores will count towards the state's assessment of my teaching job, therefore, the child needs to be identified as ESOL and assessed for a learning disability (due to her inability to learn).*

[Teacher C] *This child speaks with an accent and is ESOL. Her parents are irresponsible parents, because they probably smuggled the child in the country. "If the parents don't care about their child, why should I bust my butt" for her? (Field notes.)*

Although it appears that the players are clear as to what the payoff is to them, the real issue is what the *institution* has determined it to be. Whether the student stays in school and becomes a productive citizen-the goal of the parent-depends on her grades as well as on her motivation and attitudes towards learning. That the student learns or not will be measured by her grades and that is the expectation of the teacher. That the student's grades follow within a range that 'measures' achievement as defined by outside policymakers is a goal of the institution.

Consequently, neither the parent nor the teacher's expectations are necessarily those of the institution. Therefore, while for the parent a long-term goal of preparing the child for a future is the desired value, academic learning is the desired value for the teacher, and grades as an accurate measure of (outwardly) defined achievement are expected by the institution. In the whole equation, the views and expectations of the child are left aside.

For this interaction to be a cooperative game, all players must be clear on the payoffs, the various levels in which those payoffs operate, and what strategic knowledge the other players bring with them, in order to ascertain awareness of their "feel for the necessity and the logic of the game" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 65). When parents and schools reconcile their goals regarding the education of their children, the game becomes easier to play. Schools are, as Bourdieu notes, institutions regulated by "the system" and thus, obey rules and are held accountable for the scores the students make (although, politically speaking, the word "grades" is replaced with "learning"). When players are not aware of such regulations, or when they choose to ignore them, conflicts between goals (in view of payoffs) arise, making cooperative games hard to play and equilibrium difficult to achieve.

### *Games as Payoffs*

Judging by the payoffs sought out, three different games were played in the school, at two distinct levels (institutional –school policy at the state and national levels-and individual, or staff and family, levels): A zero-sum game, a game of avoidance/survival, and a game of learning with the other players.

In a zero-sum game, a player's gains (payoffs) are a factor of the losses of his or her opponent. Such is the case of moral games in which staff, schools, and parents shift blames onto the other, while the larger institution of schooling at the national and state levels translates all

responsibilities to the teachers, holding them accountable for the students' scores on standardized tests. Such strategy, accountability, is claimed to be a measure of the "success or failure of *the teacher*," designed to show growth by segments of the student population, according to pre-established standards (i.e., test-taking ability and bell-curve results for testing scores). As schools throughout the nation strive to perform at the highest level, those whose test scores place them in average to low segments are admonished, their job security threatened (Gitlin et al., 2003). The purpose appears connected to political aspirations, a strategy to access and maintain power.

Some players avoided the game due to work schedules, job responsibilities, and perceptions about other players and about the game itself. By eliminating school-wide parent-teacher conferences, the school facilitated the game of avoidance for the staff and discouraged parents from engaging in one-on-one communication with teachers. At the same time, the school encouraged attendance to school-wide meetings such as PTO and fundraising activities, while facilitating school-home communications using Spanish, the language of the parents, on written communications, at parent-initiated meetings, and SSTs. The data in this research suggests that, much like the ESOL students in Gitlin et al.'s (2003) study, Hispanic parents at Hope Elementary were at the same time "welcomed and unwelcomed," officially in the center of school practices, yet, pushed to the margins of school life and decision-making about their children.

At the county and school level, the game is attuned to institutional survival and so, district-wide strategies to facilitate parent-teacher communication have been applied, i.e., parent liaisons and partnership with the migrant program. The focus (payoff) continues to be on test scores, yet the school district appears to understand the game in terms of the child's learning and

development, as can be judged by their efforts to train the staff, which in the recent years has concentrated on Four Blocks, 6+1 Writing Traits, and math. Efforts are also being made to “involve” parents through school-wide meetings, especially parents of ESOL children. The school district has also shown interest in facilitating adult education attuned with academic achievement of the children served in the school district through a partnership with the Even Start/Families Read Program.

The teachers also played either a zero-sum game, a game of avoidance/survival, or one of learning with families. A zero-sum game continues to be that of all or nothing, where the gain of the teacher is a factor of blame, reverting moral accountability on the parent, as they are judged to be deficient, disinterested in their child’s learning. In the game of “survival,” or a team against “nature,” players rely on their instincts and basic skills to stay alive. Such a game happens when teachers are forced to demonstrate their efficiency as a teacher via performance of their students on standardized tests the students take at certain specific dates and times. These tests do not take into account the students’ individual characteristics such as, test taking ability, emotional and health factors at the date of testing, learning styles, and motivation. Therefore, the real contender in the game of schooling for teachers is the system, because their survival as teachers depends on their ability to comply with system-wide regulations both on a state and national level. Thus, as Hispanic parents attempt to advocate for their children, some teachers prefer to shun them from participation in decision-making. Some of the strategies used to accomplish such goals, as observed in this participatory action research, are avoiding (i.e., doing away with parent-teacher conferences); ignoring (disregarding parent’s input, such was the case of José and Angel); resisting (i.e., advising parents not to foster literacy practices in the native language at home); moralizing and judging (criticism of parents’ ability to raise their children,



such was the case of Ana and Toña); or imposing school rules on the families (i.e., parent workshops).

While some parents also play a game of avoidance, others attempted a game of coordination, including learning the language and the rules of the system and contributing their knowledge, time, and disciplining of the child, to achieve a long-term goal:

*Una de las cosas que me gustaba también pero que ya no hacen, después de mandar el reporte de las notas, daban una conferencia como... privada. O sea, llamaban a los papás, cierto día, cierta hora, para hablar con ellos sobre las notas para ver cómo estaba el niño. Y eso también era bien. Ya no lo hacen. Me acuerdo que como dos tres veces fuimos. La maestra nos explicaba sobre las notas, dónde iban y cómo iban. A mi se me hacía bien eso, porque ya sobre esas notas uno puede trabajar el siguiente periodo.* [One of the things they did (at Hope) and that I liked, but that they don't do anymore, was scheduling one-on-one (parent-teacher) conferences, like a private conference. That is, they would schedule parents at a certain day and time, to talk with them about grades and about the child's progress. That was also good, but they do not do it anymore. I remember that we went two or three times. They do not do that anymore. The teacher would explain the grades to us and would discuss the child's progress. That was good to me, because we could work at home for the next period, based on the comments the teacher made] (Interview with Angélica, June, 2002).

For the teachers, the game appears to be cooperative, yet a closer examination indicates that most teachers expected the parents to conform to their recommendations about the child. For the staff who held such views, enlisting the family's help to supervise homework and

enhance the motivation of the child to learn was not an option because of a perceived 'language deficit,' a myth commonly held that academic learning can only happen in English. By contrast, some teachers were eager to learn and to become part of the team, sharing information as we learned it. Such new knowledge became part of an individualized educational plan for the child that we carried out in the school, with active participation of the parents who shared information, beliefs, and goals for their child, as well as support for the child at home.

### *The Game as Investments*

Determining who will be able to win a game is not simply a matter of relative payoffs; it can also be a factor of investment: How much effort, money, and time do I invest to obtain a maximum benefit? And so, how many resources do my co-researchers have to invest? Such was the case for our group, where players continue their attempts to maximize their (mutual) benefits and minimize their losses. Investing is not only a strategic choice, it is also a matter of availability of resources to invest, which brings us to an important discussion in the arena of parent involvement.

Particularly important are claims that, in order to be involved in the schooling of their children in America, parents must know the cultural capital (Laureau, 1987; Bordieu, 1990) of the dominant social class. As researchers such as Delpit (1988) and Ogbu (1992, 1994) claimed, the discourses and culture of the white middle class (WMC) prevail in modern American public schools. Such cultural capital affects the curriculum taught in the schools and influences how schools and parents go about the task of helping children reach their goals. Groups that do not belong to mainstream WMC become marginal; they are often voiceless in schools and therefore are powerless to make decisions affecting the academics of their children because the ways in which parents communicate determine whether teachers will accept, ignore, or reject them.

Hispanics, Ramos (2000) argues, resist assimilation in the United States, as evidenced in their use of their native language and traditions; yet, at the same time, they feel the need to understand the target culture to communicate and interact with English-speaking people. Moreover, in spite of a widespread “low educational attainment,” they bring a repertoire of rich traditions and experiences inside and outside the school. They want to learn how to survive and function in their new society, but bigotry and prejudice forestalls their opportunities for such learning.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) contended that culture, class, and power are interconnected. Like Marx, they claimed that the ruling class maintains its hegemony through institutionalized mechanisms of power, among which the school plays an important part. Therefore, all discourses and practices within such institutions deny the existence of knowledge different to that of the class in power, and limit the access and mobility of those who are at the other end of the spectrum (See also Ogbu, 1994). In a multicultural society such as the U.S.A, schools must learn to recognize such discourses and practices, and to be open to learn about them.

Ogbu (1994) submitted that intelligence is socio-cultural, in that different societies tend to enhance and train their populations to serve that society’s particular goals and needs. In this discussion, Ogbu equated “intelligence” with “repertoires of cognitive skills” that are transmitted “through various techniques of socialization [that prompt the children] to acquire the cognitive skills or pattern of intelligence that exist already in their culture because their culture requires it” (p. 365-366). The participants in this research have expectations for their children to “function” in this society, to be productive citizens. What that means is, learning the cognitive skills that will enable them to accomplish such goals. Whether the families would like to maintain their cultural roots or to totally acculturate is a decision they must make; thus, critical education plays

an important role in adult education as well as in the education of the children. Playing the game of achievement through a parental involvement strategy in American schools requires all participants to be aware of such skills and cultural expectations in order to make informed decisions, such was the case of both Fernando and Ana.

Making decisions for the dispossessed is as dangerous as ignoring the mechanisms by which their rights are stripped away. Because language helps a person voice his or her decisions, those who have become marginalized need to find their voices, for

It is through language that individuals fashion a voice . . . that is rooted in their collective history, struggles, and lived experience, and in their relation to one another, to society, and to the ideological and material forces that surround them (Walsh, 1991, p. 4).

Valdés (1996) criticized parental involvement, claiming that such attempts aim at finding “small solutions to what are extremely complex problems [because this movement] is not based on sound knowledge about the characteristics of the families with which it is concerned” (p. 31). I submit that we must reach out and learn with the families, not in isolation from them, in order to gain insight into the complexity of the game and to find answers and strategies to play a joint, collaborative game. Such critical learning should challenge the dialectical tensions between their historical past in their homeland, and the realities of their everyday lives in the U.S.A.

It is important that we avoid authoritarian positions such as those that claim to defend the rights and interests of disadvantaged families, as they also deny a voice to those directly affected by issues related to their children’s achievement and schooling and ignore the reasons that brought these immigrants to America. Who—other than the family itself—has the right to say what should or should not be for (Latino) immigrant parents? How can we be sure that they do

not want to learn to play the game, to help their children succeed in school, to accommodate to the American way? How can we tell that they indeed do not want to learn those rules? The only way to find out is asking the parents-and the children-themselves. How else, if not through the examination of practice, can people unveil the mechanisms that overpower and control them?

Simon Bolivar, a Venezuelan general who led his army in the fights to free Latin American countries from Spanish rule is credited with saying that “*Un pueblo ignorante es instrumento de su propia destrucción*” [Uneducated people are instruments of their own destruction] (Motto for the 1984-1985 Campaign for Adult Literacy. Colombia, S.A.). As an adult educator, I believe that democracy begins with choice, and that true choice is informed choice. Only when people understand the alternatives available to them, when they unmask what is problematic in those alternatives, and when they understand those alternatives in connection (or non-connection) with the opportunities that lie ahead can they really make choices. Thus, it is necessary that *the parents* are encouraged to learn about the society in which they voluntarily or involuntarily are immersed and to examine that knowledge in light of their daily practice, their myths, and reality. Only then can they make their own choices.

Randy Stoecker (1997) underscores the benefits of analyzing reality from a variety of simultaneous frameworks, because: “without connection to other fields, the models all appear linear rather than iterative--they all end with institutionalization, rather than feedback into continuous cycles of evaluation, planning, and action” (p. 3). As this research shows, Hispanic families are capable of critical thinking. My co-researchers were also willing to help their children succeed in school. They are also capable of examining their daily lives on light of the socio-cultural and historical events that affect them, including knowledge of the target culture, which is a necessary condition for participating in any group or society. As an adult educator

and an ESOL teacher, I see it my ethical responsibility to problematize the obvious, the familiar, what is comfortable, and open opportunities for the families to join me in the quest.

For most co-researchers, acknowledging and valuing what they brought to the task of raising their children, as well as their interests and efforts to learn how to better support their child in the new culture and social environment, empowered them to take actions on behalf of their children, their families, and themselves. As they reflected on their practices, acquired *conscientização*, and reached praxis, the parents became more knowledgeable, aware, and authoritative in their parenting practices:

*Yo por eso quiero colaborarle en lo que mas pueda, porque estoy aprendiendo mucho de usted, porque usted es una buena persona y se ve que quiere a nuestros hijos. Usted me ha dado el ejemplo para querer seguir adelante, para seguir estudiando, y yo veo como en las juntas aprendemos los unos de los otros, pero todo es porque usted se preocupa y nos llama. Usted nos recuerda que podemos ir a la junta, porque a veces los padres somos un poquito dejados y no nos preocupamos, pero usted no se ha dado por vencida* [I want to work with you as much as possible, I am learning a lot from you. You are a good person and we can tell you love our children. You have given me an example to go ahead, to continue to study. I can tell that we are learning from each other at the meetings, but that we owe to your worrying and calling us on the phone. You remind us that we can go to the meetings, sometimes we parents are a little unconcerned, we do not worry. You have not given up on us]. (Arturo, April 2002)

*Parent empowerment* means that in all actions involving caregivers, there should be a goal for the participation of all these adults. In order for people to truly participate, they must

possess the tools and the capacity for making informed choices. Informed decisions are product of conscious and reflective learning that takes place through praxis.

There is no consensus about what parent and schools working together should do, or what to label these types of relationships. From Parent Involvement to Partnerships, to school-home-communities collaboration, the programs all seem to have a common flaw: a lack of agreement about the role of parents, teachers, and children in designing goals, making decisions and carrying out actions to achieve those goals and evaluating programs. Concha Delgado-Gaitán has come close to finding a balance through her “empowerment” approach; however, hers is a model founded on how parents construct knowledge and negotiate with the school. Little is said about how schools (concretely teachers) and children will participate in and become empowered by the process.

The school as an institution has a payoff in mind for the game of parental involvement: The so-called “academic achievement.” Thus, if the goals of families are similar to those of the schools-if not on what is achievement, at least in that their children can and should make “good grades”-the efforts of researchers and practitioners to understand the game and to foster action that empowers all participants becomes a necessity.

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## APPENDIX A

### THE PILOT STUDY

#### *Characterizing Parental Involvement of Hispanic Families*

The families with whom I work as an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher in a public elementary school in a southeastern city in the United States come from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and other Central American countries, as well as from South American countries such as Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Chile. These immigrant families face a series of situations in the United States that alienate and marginalize them from the mainstream culture (Valdés, 1996), phenomena that is frequently evidenced in their inability to be agents for themselves and their families as they “struggle for voice” (Walsh 1991). Struggling for voice is not just a matter of knowing the language of mainstream culture, in this case, English: Voice is also correlated to knowing social rules and appropriating the cultural capital necessary to “play by the rules and public scripts” assigned to each role in a particular group (James and Jongeward 1996). Those political and continental boundaries are compounded by cultural, historical, and socio-economic characteristics that force the uprooting of individuals and families from their native countries (Freire 1984) and above all, by frequently traumatic immigration experiences (Igoa, 1995; Valdés, 1996; Delgado-Gaitán, 1995).

National and local reports about the academics of immigrant children have brought attention to low academic achievement, high drop-out rates, and social problems such as gangs and early pregnancies among Hispanics (Hartstein, 2002, B1, B 6; Poole, 2002). A common explanation to these phenomena points at cultural differences of these groups as related to the



mainstream American students and, especially, to a “lack of parental involvement” of the families. Attempts to explain these issues either focus on deficits or on ‘needs’ to access the cultural capital (through education) of the schools; however, at the time of piloting this study, I could identify no efforts to capture the perspectives of parents and families about what parental involvement is and what it means to be involved. How (I wondered) can we claim genuine attempts to ‘involve’ these families when their perspectives are not known—much less acknowledged?

### *Zooming-in (Hispanic) Parental Practices*

I decided that to understand parent involvement of those Latino families I needed first to approach their likelihood: Is it likely that parents play the game of parental involvement in their own countries, and if so, how do they play it? Is it likely that they know how to play the game in their countries of origin? How likely is that the game of parental involvement in their country is similar to that played in American schools? Is it likely that their previous experiences and backgrounds in their countries of origin facilitate or enhance their involvement in the education of their children in America? Is it likely that those funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992, 1994, 1995) are recognized, acknowledged, and validated in American public schools? Understanding what happened at home was a first step to unveil how Latino parents play –or why they decide not to play- the game of parent involvement in American schools. (Valdés, 1996) Consequently, I conducted a pilot study to identify –or at least attempt to understand—the processes of parent involvement *in situ*.

Due to professional duties in the United States, I chose two Latin American settings to work in within a constrained timeframe. Since the vast majority of children at my school are of Mexican heritage, I selected the city of Xalapa in the state of Veracruz, a decision made on the

basis of economic convenience as other sites considered for the study proved beyond my budgetary reach. A second setting, the city of Pasto, in Colombia (South America) offered the comfort of my hometown and the advantage of knowing the culture, the schools, and some of the people to interview.

### *The Process*

In the study, I interviewed eleven people, six in Pasto and five in Xalapa. Initially, I referred to them as the participants in the study. Once the process of data collection began, that label changed to co-researchers (Freer, 1986), as we involved in processes of joint construction of knowledge during and after the interviews. Of those, I only knew about thirty percent of the people before I scheduled the interviews, and came to know the remaining seventy percent by chance, as some interviewees referred them to me after being interviewed, or as some interviewees volunteered to interview through informal conversation during my search for information in both cities (public libraries, schools, and the like).

The co-researchers were two men (one in each setting) and nine women ranging in ages from 27 to 56. Two women co-researchers were single and had no children, but had the expertise of working in dual teaching and administrative positions in a public and a private school respectively. Three co-researchers were single parents while six were raising their children with a spouse. Five co-researchers were teachers or administrators of public and private schools, and of those, one was a graduate student who had just defended her master's thesis in Pasto. Three parents –who were not teachers- had finished high school and two were working on their technical degrees

I invited participants through letters in which I explained my background and the purpose of my search. The letters were slightly different in each setting. In Pasto, due to the familiarity

with the people and because of my personal history, I indicated that I had returned home for a short visit and that I was interested in learning about home-school interactions. In Xalapa I first talked with people, then presented them a general letter explaining my goals. All participants signed a letter of consent to participate in the study and read and signed a more specific consent form before the interviews took place.

The interviews were one to one hour and a half hour in length. I transcribed every interview immediately after taped, with the exception of one in Pasto when I was required to interview within a short interval due to availability of the co-researcher. Each interviewee received a paper copy of the transcript of their interview and—for the most—engaged in a follow-up conversation with me. They mostly pointed at phrasing and their own use of repetitive language, asking me to delete or change in the write-up of the final paper.

During the month of July, 2000 I interviewed in Pasto. The transcripts revealed categories and recurrent topics that I brought to the attention of my co-researchers. I also searched for bibliographic information and research in a public and a private (university) library. With that information, I began to write drafts but was faced with the limitation of availability to confirm and cite research that I had read in the U.S.A, since I made the unforgivable mistake of leaving important information at home. Nevertheless, I wrote using what I had learned through—at the time—a year and a half of reading and researching the topic of parent involvement in American schools. I also received important information from my committee via e-mail that helped me back up some of my claims with my co-researchers.

Using the topics and draft, the group met to debrief. Over *café con empanadas*, -coffee and pies- a jovial environment, and with the presence of Lorenzo, the cam-recorder operator's bulldog, the group addressed burning issues and expressed their interest in learning about the

topic. They engaged in a vivid exchange of opinions and experiences as parents and teachers, as I gleaned insights into familiar topics that ten years after I left have only changed for the worst in public education in my country of origin. Concerns about involving parents in a country shattered by violence and social injustice, at a time in which peoples' struggles for survival occupied most of their time, were at the fore. We taped the meeting and—once again—I transcribed it to be part of subsequent interpretations of the data.

At the group's request, I mailed them a draft of a paper derived from those interviews in which I examine the role of the teacher in processes of parent involvement (the topic was the theme of one of my comprehensive exams for my doctoral studies). Even though one of the co-researcher in an administrative position in a high school used it for teacher training and validation during pre-planning the summer after I mailed it to her, I have yet to hear specifics due to difficulties in communication.

The approach in Veracruz was slightly different, as I came up to the setting as a true external agent. A previous acquaintance graciously agreed to assist me find lodging with a family during one week in the spring of 2001, and helped me connect with one of her friends, who agreed to an interview. Before my trip to Xalapa I discussed the focus and purpose for the study on the phone with the prospective interviewee. She expressed professional interest as her job involves teaching a subject on interactions in the home and environment of children to prospective teachers at a local technical institute.

I left for Veracruz one Saturday morning with nothing more than an interview previously scheduled and a few possibilities to observe schools. I hoped to interview three people. Little did I know that, as it was the case in Pasto, I would find more participants than I could possibly interview.

My trip to Veracruz went without notice. I was apprehensive having to take a bus from Veracruz to Xalapa and –especially- going from the bus terminal to my hostess’ home. Faithful to her promise, my friend arrived at the terminal and took me on a tour around the city and the university. Ten hours after I departed my home, I arrived in a colorful house, where bright yellow, blue, pink, and green gave me warm feelings of joy. I felt like I was in the middle of a tropical island and almost could hear my husband pointing at the cultural use of colors in Latinos’ lives.

My hosts were a young couple with two children, ages two and ten. Both parents worked in education. They became immediately interested on the topic of my research, and we found ourselves talking school and cultural issues over dinner every night. From the beginning, when I disclosed my need to find people to interview, they suggested some names and volunteered to be part of the study. They also asked me to observe and provide feedback on their interactions with one of their children. I gave them the letter and the consent form and we agreed not to talk about my findings or bibliographic research until after their interview. We did, however, talked about education in Mexico from their teaching perspectives, especially about the limitations teachers face in the rural area.

The next day after my arrival, I went to the library at the University of Veracruz. I spent all morning looking for research and materials that could shed light on the topic of parent involvement and what was available to students and teachers in the area. After several hours searching, I identified just a few old volumes, especially of Russian authors including Vygotsky (on language and learning) and Makarenko (on parenting), Piaget (on child development) and Freinet (on work, learning, and the role of schools and families). I also found one book for teachers on the topic of parent meetings (Jeansalle & Tramonti, 2000).

I went to copy services, a privately operated facility within the library building, with a set of books. There I met Ana Luisa (pseudonym) and we engaged in a lively conversation. Noticing the books I was copying, she learned the reason for my presence in her country –after all, ten years living in the United States have left their mark on my speech. Perhaps because she was upset at her daughter’s school rules, regulations, and treatment of her child, she pointed at the connections with my topic, - and volunteered to be interviewed. I was pleasantly surprised. At the end of my two-week stay in Mexico, I had interviewed a teacher, Ana Luisa, and the two parent/teachers with whom I boarded before I went to my next lodging station, where I observed and interviewed a single mother.

During my fifteen-day stay in Xalapa I transcribed and validated each of the six interviews with my co-researchers. Limitations of time and space (I was lodged in a home with a family) did not allow for group validation of the information collected; however, I maintained communication with the participants via e-mail and telephone. I took field notes in Pasto and Xalapa. In Xalapa I also video-taped parent-school interactions, especially a math workshop offered to parents of elementary school children in a private school.

### *Examining the Data*

Once the interviews were transcribed and examined with each interviewee, I sought for recurrent topics and found similarities with issues of parental involvement in American schools. I then wrote drafts that I presented to the interviewees and they had the opportunity to provide their feedback.

Basically, the lack of a game for academic achievement in which all interested parties played as a team was experienced in all of the three settings. Educational policy, which both in Pasto and Xalapa are explicit in their educational legislation, decrees, and articles, mandated the

schools and educators to foster the involvement of parents in the education of their children, yet the concept of such involvement did not appear clear either to legislators nor to educators or, for that matter, to the parents themselves.

The interviewees pointed out to the difficulties in “involving” parents in rural areas at planting and harvest times. They also discussed the sanctions parents faced when they did not attend school meetings (i.e., having to accompany the child to school the next day and talk with the teacher and principal. In more extreme cases, the child was suspended from school until the parent talked to the teacher). The topics for these meetings were informative and related to grades, discipline, and issues facing the children according to their age (e.g., satanic cult for pre- and adolescent students). For those interviewees who worked as school administrators, enforcing policy that required the staff to involve parents created a volatile ambience; thus, the administrators became some sort of mediators, having to exercise “tactful” requests of the staff.

The parents pointed out that large group meetings are spaces for learning as other parents ask questions of teachers and the teachers respond. This model of parent/teacher interactions points at banking education and to the status of teachers as icons, those who hold the knowledge and, thus, whose advice is dogmatically followed.

I examined the data under the focus of one specific question in the summer of 2001: The role of teachers in processes of parent involvement, as perceived by my co-researchers in both settings. For this analysis, I sought help from a specialist in Education in Colombia, who moved to the United States a year ago. The specialist helped me read the interviews (in which names and all identifying information were deleted) and the interpretation I made of them and which I wrote in a manuscript in Spanish. I mailed and e-mailed the manuscript to participants in Pasto and Xalapa, but only received some input from people in Pasto.

The study helped refine my questions as the co-researchers pointed at important additions and modifications. The son of a co-researcher contended that I should consider the opinions and experiences of the children in the study, a point I pondered heavily, yet I decided not to directly involve the children in view of data management; however, his suggestion helped me include the children's attitudes in school and motivation (or the lack of it) to learn. My initial intuition that parental involvement activities are taking place in both countries, and that those efforts face their own obstacles, was confirmed. Equally, the study yielded conclusions that were important to my understanding of the topic under study, especially as to how the parents learn to parent; what they perceive the roles of parents, teachers, and schools are; and what my co-researchers thought the role of teachers is or ought to be when working with parents.



## APPENDIX B.

### LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

January, 2002

(Recipient)

Dear Mr/Mrs \_\_\_\_\_:

At our first meeting on October, 2001, I shared with the group of parents that I am currently enrolled on a doctoral program at the University of Georgia in Athens. I also informed the group that my primary area of interest is home-school communications as related to students' achievement.

So far, our group has started a process of research of our daily lives in order to enhance opportunities for our families and for ourselves. The analyses that we are making are important to us and could be of interest to others, including other Latino families and children, as well as teachers teaching Latino children and school administrators. I would like to ask your permission to use some of the data (information) that we are generating in the group to write it as part of my dissertation, which is a written report that will enable me to obtain a doctoral degree at the University of Georgia. Oftentimes, good dissertations are published to allow people interested in the topic to obtain and generate ideas to apply to their own professional or personal practice. Our group research is unique in the area of home-school communication because of all research that has been conducted with parents so far, none focuses on the parents' experiences and opinions as perceived by the parents and families. Consequently, researchers trying to understand how to establish good home-school relationships with Latino families are presenting conclusions that might not accurately portray the experiences, needs, and characteristics of our Latino community.

You will continue to have the same opportunities to participate in group discussions even if you do not agree to be part of my doctoral research. If you do not agree to be part of my doctoral research, I will not use any information related to you in my report to the University of Georgia.

If you agree to take part in the doctoral research:

1. Your rights will be protected by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board, which means that they will make sure that I conduct my research with ethics and that the actions we undertake are fair to you. If you would like a more detailed explanation about your rights, please feel free to ask me or you can contact the University's representative at the address and phone number listed at the bottom of the consent form.
2. I will give you a consent letter in which I explain what your participation will be as well as the benefits you will derive from and the potential risks that your participation entails. I will ask you to sign and date the said consent and will give you a copy of that form for your files.
3. In that consent letter I will also ask for your permission to tape your interventions, to type, read and talk with you and/or with the group of parents about them, and to ask questions to clarify those interventions. I will also ask your permission to videotape and to take pictures of you and your family in learning situations inside and outside the school, and to use such pictures and video clips as part of my written dissertation. At no point in the process or in the final write-up will your identity be disclosed to outsiders or third-parties.
4. I also will provide you with copies of written documents, summaries, and analyses that I make based on information (data) connected with you or your family. If you agree with

videotaping and taking of pictures, you need to be aware that those pictures and video-clips will become part of public records once the dissertation is filed. Because no modifications can be made after the report is filed, you might want to examine the final draft that I will make available to you before I submit my dissertation to the University of Georgia.

5. You and I, individually or as a group, will look at the information that we collect and analyze it to uncover daily practices and to think about what we do and what we need and would like to do to improve our practice as parents, our children's learning, and our own adult lives. You will also have the opportunity to write your own accounts and reports of how your practice evolves throughout the process.

Please note: Although I would love for you to participate in my doctoral research, **you are by no means required to do so.** I do value your friendship and respect you as a person, and your decision about whether to become part of this research or not will not change that. For record-keeping purposes, I ask that you write your decision on the attached form and that you sign and date it.

I thank you very much for your time. Sincerely yours,

Carmen Urdanivia-English.

## APPENDIX C

### LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS (SPANISH)

Enero, 2002

Apreciado(a)

En nuestra primera reunión en el mes de octubre del 2001, le comuniqué al grupo de padres que actualmente me encuentro terminando mi doctorado en la Universidad de Georgia en Athens. También les informé que mi área de interés es la comunicación con padres para mejorar el rendimiento académico de mis alumnos.

Hasta el momento, el grupo ha iniciado un proceso de investigación de nuestra vida cotidiana para aumentar las oportunidades para nuestras familias y para nosotros mismos. Los análisis que estamos haciendo son importantes para nosotros y pueden también ser de interés para otras personas, incluyendo otras familias latinas y maestros y administradores de escuelas en las que se enseña a niños latinos. Me permito solicitar su permiso para usar una parte de la información (datos) que estamos generando en este grupo, como parte de mi tesis de grado. A menudo las tesis de grado se publican como artículos o libros, para que otras personas interesadas en los temas tratados en ella puedan obtener y generar ideas que puedan ser aplicadas en su práctica personal o profesional. La investigación que nuestro grupo está llevando a cabo es única en el área de comunicación entre la escuela y la familia, porque entre todas las investigaciones que se han llevado a cabo hasta el momento, ninguna toma en cuenta las opiniones y experiencias de los padres y familias latinas, por lo que algunas de las conclusiones y recomendaciones que se han hecho para trabajar con nuestras familias latinas no tienen relación con nuestras experiencias, necesidades y características.

Usted continuará teniendo las mismas oportunidades para asistir a las juntas del grupo, aún si no está de acuerdo en participar en mi investigación doctoral. Si usted no está de acuerdo en participar, **yo no voy a usar** información suya en mi reporte a la Universidad de Georgia.

Si usted acepta tomar parte en esta investigación:

1. Sus derechos como participante estarán protegidos por el Comité Institucional de Revisión de investigaciones de la Universidad de Georgia, en tanto este comité supervisará mis acciones para asegurarse de que todo lo que se haga sea justo y ético. Si usted desea saber mas sobre sus derechos, por favor déjeme saber o contacte a la representante de la Universidad, al teléfono o dirección que se encuentra al final de la carta de aceptación.
2. Usted recibirá una carta de aceptación en la cual le explico en qué va a consistir su participación y los beneficios y posibles riesgos que se anticipan como resultado de su participación. Una vez que usted firme la carta, le daré una copia para que usted pueda guardarla en sus archivos.
3. En esa carta de aceptación también pediré su permiso para grabar sus intervenciones en las reuniones o entrevistas, para mecanografiar esas intervenciones y para leerlas y hablar sobre ellas con usted, individualmente o en el grupo de padres. En nuestras conversaciones sobre dicha información se pedirá su opinión o clarificación sobre los temas de que usted hable, con el objetivo de que entre todos busquemos soluciones a problemas y situaciones que se identifiquen en esas intervenciones. Igualmente, le pediré permiso para usar una grabadora de video y para tomar fotografías de usted y de su familia. Estas fotografías –si se toman-

- representarán situaciones de aprendizaje para su familia, tanto dentro como fuera de la escuela. Parte de su permiso incluirá la posibilidad de que yo use las fotografías y algunos segmentos de los videos como parte de mi trabajo final de tesis. Su identidad no será revelada a terceros en ningún momento durante el proceso de recolección de información, o en el trabajo final, o después de finalizar la investigación.
4. Usted también recibirá copias de documentos escritos, resúmenes y análisis que se hagan con base en la información relacionada con usted o con su familia. Si usted está de acuerdo con que se le hagan tomas de videos y fotografías, usted debe saber que esas tomas y fotografías pueden llegar a ser parte de récords públicos si me decido a usarlos como parte de mi trabajo final. Una vez que yo haga entrega del reporte final a la Universidad, no puedo modificarlo; por ello, es muy importante que usted revise el borrador final que pondré a su disposición hacia finales de Mayo del 2002, antes de traducirlo para entregarlo a la universidad.
  5. usted y yo, individualmente o en grupo, analizaremos la información que se recolecte para determinar qué estamos haciendo en nuestra vida diaria como padres y para decidir si necesitamos cambiar algo, qué, y cómo hacerlo. Si este análisis se hace con base en el registro cuidadoso de sus experiencias diarias (que usted escribirá en su jornal) ayudará a mejorar oportunidades educativas para su(s) hijo(a)(s), así como su vida personal y familiar, puesto que le permitirá descubrir sus acciones y los pensamientos en los que se basan esas acciones, para que usted decida si desea cambiarlas o no, y como y por que cambiarlas. El escribir su diario también le ayudará a entenderse a si mismo(a) y a observar cómo va cambiando usted durante el proceso.

Por favor, recuerde: Aunque me encantaría que usted participe en mi investigación, **usted no está en la obligación de hacerlo.** Su amistad es muy valiosa para mi y le respeto mucho como persona para obligarlo a hacer algo que usted no desea hacer, por lo que, cualquiera que sea su decisión, le seguiré teniendo en alta estima. La universidad me exige que llene unos requisitos en cuanto a papeleo y mantenimiento de récords, por lo que le solicito que responda por escrito a esta solicitud, en la hoja que le anexo, y que firme y escriba la fecha en esa hoja.

Le agradezco muchísimo por su tiempo. Sinceramente,

Carmen Urdanivia-English.

Dear Mrs. English:

In response to your request for my participation in the study titled "**Parents, Communities, and Schools: Perspectives on Interactions in an American Public School**" which you are conducting as part of your doctoral program at the University of Georgia:

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate according to the terms stated in the consent form I signed, a copy of which you gave me.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the research, but will continue to attend the group meetings.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Apreciada Maestra Carmen:

En respuesta a su solicitud para mi participación en el estudio titulado "**Perspectivas en Interacciones entre Padres, Comunidades y Escuelas en una Escuela Pública en los Estados Unidos**" me permito comunicarle que:

\_\_\_\_\_ Acepto participar de acuerdo a los términos establecidos en la carta de consentimiento que he firmado y cuya copia usted me ha entregado.

\_\_\_\_\_ No acepto participar en la investigación, pero me reservo el derecho de continuar asistiendo a las reuniones generales del grupo.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nombre

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fecha

## APPENDIX D

### PARENT SURVEY

The information you provide on this questionnaire will be held anonymous. Your answers will be used for a dissertation to obtain a doctoral degree in education. The report could also be published. In reporting the results of your participation, all identifying information will be disguised. If you wish to review the final analysis before it is submitted, I will provide it to you. Any suggestions to ensure anonymity or lack of identification of your person will be welcomed.

I conduct this survey to analyze factors that help students learning English as a Second Language to be successful in school. Most of the following questions are about your child's educational experiences and your involvement with his or her education. A few questions address identifying and general family characteristics.

#### I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Provide information for each person living in the same household with your child:

Relationship to child (i.e., father, mother, sister, friend, grandparents)	Age				Education (write highest level attained)	Speaks (S) understands (U) or writes (W) English?
	Under 10	10- 20	21- 30	31 +		

#### II. PARENT(S) / CAREGIVERS

	Father/Other caregiver	Mother / Other caregiver
2.1. Occupation (If a worker - what do you do?; if a student - what are you studying?)		
2.2. Professional goals (Please explain what your expectations are for the future.)		

2.3 Please explain what your expectations are for your child, in terms of his or her education.

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2.4. Which factors influence your child's achievement? How?

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2.5. What do you see to be your child's strengths for academic success?

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2.6. What do you do at home to help your child/children succeed in education?

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2.7. What resources do you have at home to help your children with their schooling?

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2.8 Tell me about the role your parents played in your own education.

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2.9. I would like to take you back to a time in which you interacted with your child. Would you please tell me, in as much detail as possible, what happened:

When your child asked for your help with homework?

---

---

When your child wants something you could not afford to buy?

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Your child refuses to mind you, for instance, he or she did not want to go to bed early?

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How do you help your child learn English?

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2.10. What were your interactions with your children's school before coming to America? (Please circle)

1. Registering your child at the school.
2. Learning about your child's behavior and grades.
3. Participating in school events.
4. Interacting with: (Who initiated the contact?)
  - a. Teachers ( )
  - b. Authority figures such as the principal, assistance principal, etc. ( )

5. What were your most common reasons for contacting the school?

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2.11. How are those interactions similar to or different from your experiences in American Schools?

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2.12. What would you suggest to improve home-school communications?

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**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR RESPONSE!**



## APPENDIX E

### SAMPLE FLYER

It's time to be informed!

A family is a precious gift to us, and we need to be informed to make sure we meet the needs of all. During the month of April, two guest speakers will come to [Hope Elementary] to talk with all parents about some issues of concern. The meetings will be held in English and Spanish.

#### MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Saturday, April 13, 2002. 12:00 m.

Guest Speaker: (Name and institution)

Topic: Domestic Violence: Your rights and responsibilities.

Saturday, April 27, 2002. 12:00 m.

Guest Speaker: (Name and institution)

Topic: Discipline, punishment, and child abuse. Cultural differences in the education of children.

-----  
Please help us plan the meetings. Let us know whether you will be attending one or both meetings and how many people will come with you. Cut out and send the bottom part of this letter to the school tomorrow.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade level: \_\_\_\_\_ Homeroom Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ I will attend the meeting on April 13.

\_\_\_ I will attend the meeting on April 27

The following number of people will attend with me:

\_\_\_ adults \_\_\_\_\_ children.

## APPENDIX F

### CONSENT FORM - ENGLISH

I agree to take part in a study titled “Parents, Communities, and Schools. Perspectives on Interactions in an American public school,” which is being conducted by Carmen Urdanivia-English, Doctoral student at the University of Georgia, Department of Language Education, (706) 367-0817 under the direction of a doctoral committee chaired by Dr. JoBeth Allen, The University of Georgia, Dept. of Language Education, 125 Aderhold Hall, Athens, GA 30602-7123, (706)542-5674.

I further agree to (1) the audio and video taping of my interventions at meetings that we are conducting as part of Mrs. English’s parent outreach program in the school, (2) to taking pictures and using photography to enhance group and individual writing and reflection, (3) to use the information collected in analysis of concerns that the group might share, and (4) for that information to become part of Mrs. English’s written dissertation. I reserve the right to stop the tape recorder at any time during the meetings, and to re-start it when deemed necessary. I may or may not wish to review the contents of the meeting transcripts and the interpretation of such transcripts by the researcher. Tapes and transcripts will be kept on file for a period of a least five (5) years, after which period the tapes will be erased and the transcripts destroyed, unless -upon request of the researcher- I grant written permission to keep them for a longer period of time.

I understand that the purpose of the study is to describe interactions of families and schools, as experienced by Latinos in American public schools. Any information collected about my family or me will be coded, to avoid tracking and identification of my person and my family by persons or entities other than the researcher and her advising committee.

Some of the benefits of my participation in the study might be in the kind of personal rewards for contributions to understanding my culture, as a means to enhance parent involvement of Latino Parents in schools worldwide. I might as well benefit from interacting with peers and other people with similar experiences to mine, in enhancing my understanding of what guides our daily practices.

No discomfort or stresses are expected as a result of my participation in the study.

No risks are foreseen as a result of my participation in the study.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by phone at (706) 367-0817, or by e-mail at [curdenglish@msn.com](mailto:curdenglish@msn.com).

I understand that I do not have to take part in this study, and that I can stop taking part at any time previous to the writing of the final draft, without giving any reason, and without penalty. Likewise, upon my request, I can have all information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. However, I understand that I cannot make such request after seven days have passed after the final draft is made available to me for my review.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form, which is double-sided to reflect the Spanish and the English version of the form.

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Signature of Researcher - Date

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Signature of Participant - Date

For questions or problems about your rights, please call or write: Ms. Julia Alexander, Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; E-Mail Address [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu).

## APPENDIX G

### CONSENT FORM – SPANISH

Acepto participar en el estudio titulado “Perspectivas en interacciones entre Padres, Comunidades y Escuelas en una escuela pública de los Estados Unidos,” conducido por la estudiante doctoral Carmen Urdanivia-English, de la Universidad de Georgia, departamento de Idiomas, (706) 367-0817, bajo la dirección de un comité doctoral coordinado por la Doctora JoBeth Allen, de la Universidad de Georgia, Departamento de Idiomas, 125 Aderhold Hall, Athens, GA 30602-7123, teléfono (706) 542-5674.

Igualmente, acepto que: (1) mis intervenciones y comentarios en las reuniones del grupo que la Sra. English está conduciendo como parte de su plan para trabajar con padres en la escuela, sean grabadas; (2) a que se tomen fotografías mías y de mi familia o a que se usen fotografías ya existentes, para facilitar la reflexión individual y colectiva de tópicos que nos interesen en relación con nuestra práctica como padres; (3) a que la información que de allí resulte sea usada por el grupo, para buscar alternativas de solución a problemas conjuntos; y a que (4) para que mis intervenciones sean usadas como parte del trabajo final de tesis de la Sra. English. Me reservo el derecho de detener la grabación en cualquier momento y de re-comenzarla cuando lo considere necesario. Puedo escoger entre revisar los contenidos de la transcripción de los cassettes y la interpretación de la transcripción hecha por la investigadora, o no hacerlo. Tanto las grabaciones como las transcripciones serán mantenidas en un archivador por un período de por lo menos cinco (5) años, después de los cuales las grabaciones serán borradas y las transcripciones destruidas, a menos que yo dé permiso escrito a la investigadora para guardarlos por un período mayor. La investigadora me podrá solicitar permiso por escrito para hacerlo cuando el plazo de cinco años esté próximo a cumplirse.

Entiendo que el propósito del estudio es describir mis experiencias sobre cómo interactúan los padres y el personal de las escuelas públicas en los Estados Unidos. Cualquier información que se recolecte sobre mi familia o mi persona será codificada el seguimiento y la identificación de mi persona o mi familia por personas o entidades que no sean la investigadora y su comité de investigación.

Algunos de los beneficios que mi participación en este estudio puede traerme pueden ser de tipo personal, en cuanto mis contribuciones ayudarán a mejorar la comprensión de mi cultura como base para mejorar el trabajo con padres de origen latino en las escuelas alrededor del mundo. También puedo beneficiarme de las interacciones con otros participantes del grupo, o con personas que tengan experiencias similares a las mías, a través de un mejor entendimiento sobre lo que guía nuestra práctica diaria.

Se espera que mi participación en el estudio no me traerá incomodidades o stress.

Se espera que mi participación en el estudio no me traerá riesgo alguno.

La investigadora responderá cualquier pregunta sobre la investigación, ahora o durante el curso del proyecto, y puede ser contactada por teléfono, llamando al (706) 367-0817, o por correo electrónico, en la dirección: [curdenglish@msn.com](mailto:curdenglish@msn.com).

Entiendo que no estoy obligado(a) a participar en este estudio, y que puedo dejar de participar en cualquier momento antes de la aprobación del borrador final, sin dar explicación alguna y sin que tenga que pagar multa alguna. Igualmente, puedo solicitar que toda la información que se haya recolectado sobre mí sea removida de los archivos de la investigación, o destruida. Especialmente, entiendo que solamente tengo siete (7) días a partir de la fecha en que la Sra. English me facilite el borrador final, para solicitar que la información relacionada con mi familia o conmigo sea eliminada de dicho borrador.

Entiendo los procedimientos descritos anteriormente. Mis preguntas han sido respondidas a mi entera satisfacción, y estoy de acuerdo en participar en este estudio. Se me ha entregado una copia de esta forma, en la que la versión en inglés se encuentra al respaldo.

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Firma de la investigadora - fecha

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Firma del (la) participante - fecha.

Si tiene preguntas o problemas sobre sus derechos, por favor llame o escriba a: Ms. Julia Alexander, Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Teléfono (706) 542-6514. Dirección de E-Mail: [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu).