

Re-Learning the Script of Parental Involvement in the United States;  
Three Case Studies of Mexican Parents in Southwest Virginia.

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement is highly important for children's success at school. Research has shown that parental involvement leads to higher student achievement, better school attendance, and a reduction in dropout rates. However, what happens with those parents who do not speak English or have limited communication skills in this language? How can they become involved in their children's schooling when the children attend school in a language foreign to the parents? This study examines the experiences of three Mexican immigrant mothers and one father getting involved in their children's education in the United States. Helena was an active participant of a service-learning program hosted by a medium-sized Land Grant University. Sandra also attended the program but only for some time. Finally, the Hernandez parents, Mercedes and Jose Luis, were randomly selected in the community and did not participate in the service-learning program. This qualitative study relied mainly upon semi-structure interviews with the participants along with observations and field notes. The conclusions from this study provide insight as to how Mexican-immigrant parents with low-income develop an understanding of the school system in the United States.

Analysis revealed two main strategies that parents use to communicate with the school: 1) using interpreters as affordance networks for communication, and 2) using their own knowledge of English to take actions and comply with school requirements. Data show that, contrary to common assumptions, parents do not prefer children as their first option for interpreting functions. In terms of learning about standard cultural practices of parental involvement parents accommodate to school demands by using various strategies and resources from their *funds of knowledge*. *Funds of knowledge* refers to those "skills, abilities, ideas, or practices or bodies of knowledge" that are "historically developed in a community" in order to "preserve the household's functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005, p. 72). Parents learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement and at the same time they support their children's education; in this process parents rely on their own cultural repertoires. Besides, parents seek places where they can develop community ties in order to learn about the how-tos of life in the United States. Finally, findings demonstrate that parents feel frustration and anxiety about their relationship with the schools, since they are facing with great resilience the every life challenges of living in a culture and language different from their own. The main findings of this study and discussing on the implications provided a discussion for policy changes in the context of the NCLB act, and suggestions for teacher preparation programs, and local school or service programs.

## DEDICATION

To all the immigrant parents who live in the United States and raise their children in a language and culture different from theirs.

To my grandparents: Carmen Méndez, Jesús Uribe, and María Velazquez for their strength and the lessons I learned from them in life.

In Memoriam:

To Carlos and Elizabeth

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of contents	v
Chapter 1	
Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Significance of the Study	2
The Achievement Gap	2
The Importance of Parental Involvement	3
Statement of the Problem	4
What is Parental Involvement?	4
Deficit Notions about Non-English Speaking and Minority Parents	6
Purpose of the study	8
Including Diverse Voices in the Debate	8
Theoretical Perspective	9
Funds of Knowledge	9
Foundations for the Research Questions	11
Initial Interest in This Question	11
Pilot Study with Adriana: A Snapshot	12
Looking for ways to communicate with the school.	13
Information networks and community building.	14
The Crossing the Border through Service-Learning Program	14
Research questions	15
Summary	16
Chapter 2	
Literature Review	18
Introduction	18

	Background	19
	Teaching Lessons Outside of the Classroom	20
	Intersections with Race, Class and Gender	22
	Parents' Negotiations of Cultural Practices	23
	Schools' Efforts to Reach Parents	26
	Lessons from High Performing Schools with Large Migrant Populations.	27
	Home Visits: A Funds of Knowledge Approach.	30
	Parent's Collaboration with the School.	31
	Learning English with a Purpose.	34
	The New Latino Diaspora	36
	Summary	40
Chapter 3	Methodology	43
	Introduction	43
	Justification for a Qualitative Research Design	43
	Research Design	44
	Case Studies as Qualitative Research	46
	Comparison Approach	46
	Case Studies	47
	Pluralistic Approach	48
	The Settings	48
	The New River Valley	49
	Roanoke	51
	Entry into the Field	51
	The service-learning program	51
	The Catholic Church	52
	The Participants	52
	Helena	52
	Sandra	53
	Jose Luis and Mercedes	53

Insider-Outsider Perspective	53
Data Collection	54
The Interviews	54
The Interview Process	55
Other Sources of Data	56
Observation	56
Field notes	56
Limitations	57
Ethical Issues	57
Data Analysis	58
Consolidation the Data	58
Interpreting the Data	59
Data Analysis in the Case Studies	60
Confirmation of data	61
Member Check	61
Peer Examination	61
Researcher's Biases	61
Summary of Methodology	62
Chapter Four Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings	63
Introduction	63
Introduction to the Participants in this Research	64
Helena	64
Meeting Helena	64
Reconnecting with Helena	65
Socioeconomics	66
Educational Level	67
Sandra	67
Meeting Sandra	67
Reconnecting with Sandra	68
Socioeconomics	69

Educational Level	70
Mercedes and Jose Luis	70
Meeting Mercedes and Jose Luis	70
Socioeconomics	72
Educational Level	73
Summary of Introduction to Participants	74
Analysis and Interpretation of Findings	75
Communication Channels	75
Using Interpreters	76
Case by Case Description of Interpreters	77
Helena	77
The Service-Learning Students	79
Getting Help from Her Oldest Daughter	81
Sandra	83
Using the School Resources	83
Her Oldest Daughter	86
Mercedes and Jose Luis	88
School Resources	88
Their Own Children	90
Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings	92
Similarities Across Cases	94
Differences Across Cases	95
Conclusion	97
Language Use	98
The Role of English Use in Immigrant Communities	98
Second Language Use in the Framework of Sociocultural	100
Theory and Situated Learning	
Case by Case Description on Language Use	101
Helena	102
Comprehension	102
Language Production	103

Sandra	105
Comprehension	105
Language Production	107
Mercedes and Jose Luis	109
Comprehension	109
Mercedes English Comprehension	111
Language Production	112
Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings	114
Strategies for Language Use and Comprehension	115
Conclusion	117
Standard Practices of Parental Involvement	119
Differences in Expectations	120
Framing the Analysis	121
Case by Case Analysis	122
Helena	122
Receiving Information	122
Repetition and Experience	122
Learning at Home	124
The Service-Learning Students	125
Sandra	127
Several Sources of Information	127
Convivencia	129
Events and Routines	130
Mercedes and Jose Luis	132
Missing Parent-Teacher Conferences	132
Coping with Teenage Pregnancy	133
Facing Racial and Interethnic Conflicts	137
Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings	139
Similarities Across Cases	140
Differences Across Cases	142
Conclusion	144

Description of Experiences	145
Schoolcentric Notion of Parental Involvement	145
Accommodation, Resistance, and Resilience	147
Case by Case Description of Experiences	148
Helena	148
Cultural Differences	150
Fear, Frustration, and Some Hope	151
Sandra	153
Limited Collaboration with the Teacher	154
Double Effort	155
Mercedes and Jose Luis	157
How Can We Support Our Children?	159
Resilience	160
Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings	161
Description of Experiences	162
Conclusion	164
Summary of Findings	165
Chapter Five	
Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research	167
Purpose of the Research	167
Main Research Findings	169
Overarching Objective	178
Implications of the Study	180
What is Parental Involvement	181
Implications for the Policies of NCLB	183
Implication for Educational Programs and Services in the	185
School and the Community	
Implications for Teaching Preparation Programs	186
Questions for Future Research	188
References	189
Appendix A: Informed Consent	204

Appendix B: Documento de Consentimiento	207
Appendix C: Interview Questions	210
Appendix D: Preguntas de la Entrevista	211

**LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES**

<b>Table</b>	<b>Title of the table</b>	<b>Page</b>
1	Epstein and Sanders' Typology on Parental Involvement	4
2	Main Trends on Parental Involvement Research	19
3	Gilles and Montgomery County Demographic Profile	50
4	Botetourt County Demographic Profile	51
5	Helena's Family	66
6	Sandra's Family	69
7	The Hernandezes' Family	73
8	Use of Interpreters by Order of Preference in Each Case Study	93
<b>Figure</b>	<b>Title of Figure</b>	<b>Page</b>
1	Re-Learning the Script of Parental Involvement	179

Chapter One: Introduction

**Introduction**

Parental involvement is highly important to children's success at school. Research has shown that parental involvement leads to higher student achievement, better school attendance, and a reduction in dropout rates (Driessen Smit, & Slegers, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2007; Viramontez Anguiano, 2004). As a result, parental involvement seems to be one solution for helping Latino students in closing the achievement gap compared to their non-Latino<sup>1</sup> peers. However, what happens with those parents who do not speak English or have limited communication skills in this language? How can they become involved in their children's schooling when the children attend school in a language foreign to the parents?

Research indicates that Latino parents deeply care about their children's education (Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001); nonetheless, teacher perceptions on parents of Latino origin point toward the contrary (Waterman, 2008). The purpose of this research is to bring forward the voices of non-English speaking Mexican parents, often inaudible in the research regarding parental involvement, as they articulate their understandings of the school system in the United States. In this chapter, I discuss the significance of the research, the problem statement, the questions that drive the inquiry, and the theoretical perspective that frames the study.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a long discussion of how to name the people of Latin American origin. For statistical purposes the government adopted the denomination "Hispanics," but several authors have contested the term adopting the name Latino, Chicano. I will respect the denomination made by the authors when referring to specific research. However, for the purpose of this dissertation I will use the term Latino when referring to people from Latin American origin and the term Mexican Americans when referring to children born in the United States from Mexican parents.

## **Significance of the Study**

### **The Achievement Gap**

The segment of the United States population considered Latino or of Latin American origin has grown considerably in the last decades. According to Fry and Gonzales (2008), the Latino population is the fastest-growing minority in the United States. Therefore, changes in this demographic will change all aspects of life, from politics to mass media culture and entertainment, to say nothing of requiring significant changes in the educational system. These researchers found that from 1990 to 2006, students considered of Hispanic background already encompassed 60% of the total growth of school enrollment over that period. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 15% of students enrolled in elementary school are considered Latino, and nearly 50% of them attend urban schools. Hispanic or Latino students comprise 75% of all students in Limited English Proficiency (LEP) programs. It is predicted that by 2030, the number of children ages 5 to 13 considered of Latino origin ages will almost double, representing one-fourth of the total K-12 school population (Gibson, 2002).

A serious educational issue is that children whose first language is Spanish, or who are of Hispanic heritage, have lower grades in standardized testing (Tinkler, 2002). Hispanics perform below the level of their non-Hispanic peers in reading and mathematics by ages 9, 13, and 17 (NAEP, 2005), which are some of the ages when standardized testing is administered. In the long run, Latinos have the highest high school dropout rates in the nation (Laird, Cataldi, KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2008). Consequently, research that can support efforts to assist Latinos in overcoming the achievement gap is urgently needed.

## **The Importance of Parental Involvement**

In the context of accountability and the No Child Left Behind Reform (NCLB), special attention has been given to the issue of involving parents in their children's education. As stated by the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE), the new educational reform legislation mandates that each school district should develop strategies intended to foster parental involvement. These changes in NCLB reform are the consequence of two important factors that underline the importance of parental involvement. First, researchers have found that parental involvement increases the overall performance of student at schools (Driessen et al., 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kuperminc et al., 2007; Viramontez Anguiano, 2004). Parental involvement leads to higher student achievement, better school attendance, and lower dropout rates (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). The second demonstrates that, given the benefits of parental involvement, there has been an increasing interest in reinforcing the relationships between the school personnel and the parents in order to benefit the community (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Furthermore, parental involvement has been identified as one answer to the problem of low academic achievement. Researchers point out that parental involvement benefits students regardless of the economic, racial, ethnic, or cultural background of the family (Epstein & Sanders 2000; Inger, 1993; Jeynes, 2003; Tinkler, 2002). Epstein and Sanders (2000) point out: "Family practices of involvement are as important as or more important than family background variables for determining whether and how students progress and succeed in school" (p. 289). As an example, in a study with 209 Korean-American students, Kim (2003) found a significant correlation between the children's educational achievement and their parents' involvement in their education. According to Kim, the gap between the educational achievement of children

with highly educated parents and those not so educated parents almost disappeared with increased parental involvement.

**Statement of the Problem**

The obvious conclusion concerning the benefits of parental involvement is that, in order to narrow the achievement gap, schools should involve the parents in the education of their children, particularly of those children who do not speak English. However, as simple as it seems, it is important to deconstruct the complexities in the relationship between Latino parents and the school system. For that reason, several issues need to be examined.

**What is Parental Involvement?**

The first problem is that parental involvement means different things to different people. If the question is “What exactly constitutes parental involvement?” the answer is multifaceted: homework activities supported by the parents, volunteering in school, attendance at parent-teacher conferences, participation in school functions, and service on school boards or councils are some of the activities that fit under the umbrella of *parental involvement* (Kuperminc et al., 2007). Epstein and Sanders (2000, p. 289) establish the following types of parental involvement

Table 1

*Epstein and Sanders’ Typology on Parental Involvement*

Parenting	Helping all families understand child and adolescent development, and establishing home environments that support children as students
Communicating	Designing and conducting effective forms of communication about school programs and children’s progress
Volunteering	Recruiting and organizing help and support for school functions

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	and activities.
Learning at home	Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and curriculum-related activities and decision
Decision-making	Including parent representatives and all families in school decisions
Collaborating with the community	Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families.

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The multiple facets of parental involvement might be confusing for teachers and parents. Teachers may weigh some types of parental involvement activities more heavily than parents do. For example, volunteering for school functions might be a higher priority for school personnel than for parents. On the other hand, immigrant parents may not even be aware of culturally relevant activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, giving the impression they are not involved in their children's education (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lightfoot, 2004).

In the context of immigrant parents, researchers have argued that there is a difference between teachers' beliefs of what constitutes parental involvement and those of immigrant Mexican or Latin American parents regarding their own role as educators (e.g., Elenes et al., 2001; Lawson, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). For instance, in an ethnographic study with ten Mexican families, Valdés (1996) analyzes the differences in perspective between families and teachers. Valdés argues that Mexican parents believe that their

role as educators is to instill *respeto* [respect], and to teach good behavior and manners.

Meanwhile, teachers perceive that supporting academic tasks or being physically present in school activities is a symbol of parents' interest and the correct way for parents to be involved.

As a result, not all parents are involved in the same ways, nor do they perform the same kinds of activities in schools. Therefore, cultural misunderstanding and differences in expectations may create the impression, on the side of the teachers, that Mexican or Latino parents do not attach importance to the education of their children.

### **Deficit Notions About Non-English Speaking and Minority Parents**

Another problem is that "parental involvement" is defined by the needs of the schools rather than through a collaborative assessment examining both the needs of both teachers and parents. Lawson (2003) indicates that teachers and school administrators frame parental involvement mainly from their own perspective: How can the parents support the schools' mission and its teachers? Although this question is relevant for teachers and administrators, the problem is that it places all the attention on the needs of the school and the teachers, without understanding the context and life experiences of parents, in this case immigrants that do not speak the language of the country where they have established their new home. The school is placed at the center of the relationship, creating a *schoolcentric* (Lawson, 2003) notion of parental involvement. Parents are excluded from the decision-making process, yet it is assumed that parents should create structured educational environments at home to support the school's mission (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lightfoot, 2004).

Furthermore, Lightfoot (2004) argues that the *schoolcentric* understanding of parental involvement not only places the school in the center of the relationship, but that minority parents are placed in an opposite binary relationship with their White, middle class counterparts. Those

parents who are middle- or upper-class, and generally highly educated, are seen as *full* or *having*, in contrast to minority (low income, urban, ethnically diverse, and linguistically diverse) parents who are *empty* or *lacking*. This perspective has consequences for the relationship between the educators and the parents as well. Parents that are perceived as *too full* might be seen as intrusive or demanding, but they are nevertheless regarded as resources for the teachers. Meanwhile, parents that are *lacking* are seen as a “problem” that needs to be fixed, uninterested in their children’s education (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lightfoot, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

In summary, parental involvement can be seen as critical, and could provide one solution to the problem of improving student achievement. However, there are several issues to be considered in understanding the relationship between minority parents and-schools. In the context of NCLB, the reform stresses the use of parents as resources to create strategies of involvement, but this dissertation proposal is grounded on the perception that it is ultimately the school’s decision to determine what is more valuable as parental involvement. The *schoolcentric* notion of parental involvement leads to the perception that minority parents constitute a problem that needs to be fixed, uninterested in their children’s education, or not even involved. Teachers or administrators who have little cross-cultural experience with children of different ethnic backgrounds or who have a limited understanding of what is required to teach in multicultural settings might have difficulties understanding minority and low income students and their families in cross cultural settings (Crozier, 2001; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

The aim of my research is to address these issues by contributing to the growing but still limited understanding of low income Mexican immigrant parents and by adding to the developing theories on parental involvement. My study will be situated in the context of the Southwest Virginia, with the overarching objective of understanding and documenting the

experiences of Mexican immigrant parents and their ways of making sense of the school system in the United States.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Research has shown that parents of Latino background care very much about their children's education (Delgado Gaitan, 1987; Lawson, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Villenas, 2001). Nevertheless, in order to understand non-English speaking parents' practices of involvement, it is necessary to examine these experiences from their point of view. Although studies have looked at the best strategies for parental involvement in the school (e.g. Anguiano & Viramontez, 2004; De Gaetano, 2007; Olmedo, 2003; Salinas Sosa, 1997), there has been little consideration about how immigrant, non-English speaking parents develop an understanding of the school system in the United States. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to bring forward the voices of non-English speaking Mexican mothers as they articulate their understandings of the school system. Their voices are often inaudible in the research regarding parental involvement. The ultimate goal of the study is to provide valuable information to school personnel to help in the development of parental involvement strategies that can benefit immigrant parents, the schools, and the community.

### **Including Diverse Voices in the Debate**

In the vast literature in the field of parental involvement, researchers have considered different strategies to include parents in the educational development of children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez, 2001; Stagg, Peterson & Ladky, 2007). Others have described programs and activities to reinforce parent involvement and their presumed and actual effects (e.g. De Gaetano, 2007; Salinas Sosa, 1997; Waterman, 2008). Federally-funded programs such as Parents as Educational Partners (PEP) have attempted to bridge the gap between parental

involvement issues and English language acquisition needs from the side of the parents. However, the literature on parental involvement and minority parents is far from complete. Lawson (2003) points out “differences in context, actors, and theoretical points of departure mandate additional research” (p. 78). My aim is to bring forward and document the voice of non-English speaking parents to understand their efforts in raising children in a school culture and in a country where the primary language is foreign to them. If we can understand these minority parents, we are more likely to be able to bridge the gap between parents, teachers, and schools, thus, to build relationships that can better benefit the parents, the teachers, the students, the schools and ultimately the community.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This research is grounded in a theoretical framework that focuses on cross-cultural transitions. I situate my research in this context because in the field of education several scholars have focused on addressing the struggles of minority students and marginalized communities. However, in practice teachers have little cross-cultural experience and limited understanding of what is required for teaching in multicultural contexts (Asher, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008). In my attempt to help teachers understand minority children and their parents, I grounded my work on the Funds of Knowledge (Moll, et al., 2005) approach.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

*Funds of knowledge* refers to those “skills, abilities, ideas, or practices or bodies of knowledge” that are “historically developed in a community” in order to “preserve the household’s functioning and well-being” (Moll, et al., 2005, p. 72). As a theoretical framework, funds of knowledge offers a way of thinking about minority children’s backgrounds. Based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), learning is described as a process that involves social as well as

cognitive transformations. Therefore, learning is the result of social interactions among the individual, society, and culture (Rosebery, McIntyre, & González, 2001). Mexican children or children bring diversity in the ways they interact and develop in the community. Thus, my research is framed in the funds of knowledge approach to understand the funds of knowledge of the family to further the acceptance of culturally and linguistically diverse minority children, their families, and their communities.

Minority children and their families are usually perceived and evaluated by school personnel from a deficit model (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Ramirez, 2003). As Lightfoot (2004) points out, linguistic minority families are placed as *lacking* because they do not have sufficient English language proficiency to communicate with the school. When teachers perceive children or their families as lacking, they underestimate the richness of the families' backgrounds (González, Moll, Floyd Tenery et al., 2005).

Rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools. This emphasis on "disadvantages" has provided justification for lowered expectations in schools and inaccurate portrayals of the children and their families. (p. 90)

Rosebery, et al. (2001), point out that people use different cultural systems and resources in their lives. Therefore, I seek to further an understanding of the funds of knowledge that immigrant mothers use in their attempt to communicate with or interact with the schools.

My purpose is to move past negative assumptions or *deficit* notions that exist about Mexican immigrant parents and their perceived inability to engage in their children's learning process. In this study, I plan to describe their experiences and suggest that we seek to understand

them as people in a specific context and within relationships that develop practices, in this case of parental involvement, within a broader structural framework. Consequently, if we can understand the dialectic relationship between structural forces and personal resources to overcome educational struggles we will better understand the experiences of Mexican immigrant parents and their practices of involvement.

My aim is to bring forward the voices of the families and gain a contextual understanding of their experiences. Holland and Lave (2001) warn against the risks of considering social participants, in this case immigrant parents with scarce economic resources and little knowledge of English, as people affected by already formed and superimposed structures of power. Therefore, we need to resist the temptation of thinking about the stories of these mothers experiencing the school system in Southwest Virginia as examples of an assumed history of struggle, that reinforce negative assumptions of Latinos in the US.

### **Foundations for the Research Questions**

The impetus for this research is based on questions originating from three different scenarios: 1) an initial inquiry that emerged from my master's thesis; 2) further questions that came to the surface in a pilot study conducted in the community; and 3) some informal observations I made as a research assistant in a service-learning<sup>2</sup> class: "Crossing the Border Through Service Learning," in the Mexican and Honduran community.

### **Initial Interest in This Question**

In my master's degree thesis, I completed a study that investigated how the experience of immigration transforms identities by examining the cases of three Mexican women. These three participants had emigrated from Mexico to the United States in recent years for economic

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<sup>2</sup> This service-learning class at Virginia Tech places Spanish and Education students in the homes of Mexican and Honduran families living in the nearby communities. Students regularly visit the families, teaching English as a second language, while they learn about the Latino community and life as immigrant workers.

reasons. All were living with their families and raising their children in this country. From our conversations and time together, I observed and understood their struggles, and became aware of their efforts and hard work. I became intrigued also by their experiences of having to raise children in another country. What puzzled me the most was that none of them were proficient in English. I started contemplating what it takes to raise a child in a different country, without knowing the language, and with scarce economic resources. How do these mothers make sense of the school system in the United States? This question became the overarching objective of my current research design.

### **Pilot Study with Adriana: A Snapshot**

Inspired by my contact with the three participants from my master's thesis, I wanted to expand my understanding of the experiences of Mexican mothers, with low income, and with none or limited English proficiency, whose children were attending schools in Southwest Virginia. Therefore, I conducted a pilot study in the spring semester of 2007 to investigate this interest. Kilbourn (2006) points out that doctoral students completing qualitative research must conduct a pilot study to verify that their inquiry can lead to a substantial research project. The preliminary findings from the pilot study helped inform the second set of research questions. Here I provide only a brief snapshot of the research.

For 6 weeks I conducted an ethnographic research project with Adriana and her family<sup>3</sup>. Adriana and her husband Hugo, originally from Jalisco, Mexico, lived in the United States with their four children: Hugo Jr. age 5; Nancy, age 4; Alejandro, age 2; and three-month old baby Victor. Hugo Jr. was attending a Head Start kindergarten, and a preschool teacher from the Head Start program visited Nancy weekly.

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<sup>3</sup> In order to protect the identity of my research participants I refer to them by pseudonyms.

I met Adriana when I was working as a research assistant in the service-learning program. She was the neighbor of one of the participants in the class, but she did not attend or participate in the program. I conducted the study with Adriana because she did not have students placed in her home; therefore she was not receiving any help with the English language, such as learning English, homework support for her children, or translation of papers sent by the school. I identified two main findings from my interactions with Adriana: 1) she relied on language mediators to contact the school system; and 2) she shared a network system that helped her to corroborate that the information was accurate and appropriate.

**Looking for ways to communicate with the school.** Raising her children in Southwest Virginia was challenging for Adriana. From my conversations with her I learned that she spoke very little English. Therefore, she relied on different language mediators to perform everyday life activities and to contact the school system when needed. For everyday chores, she depended on her husband Hugo. He assisted with home-related activities on his day off. Hugo came to the United States when he was 16 years old to work in one of the local restaurants. The English he picked up while working in the restaurant was good enough to allow him get by. Although he did not have any formal schooling experience with learning English here or back in Mexico. In order to enroll their children in school, Hugo and Adriana relied on their acquaintance Anita, an off-duty social worker, who was of Mexican origin. Furthermore, Adriana learned that I was fluent in English. When she needed to register Hugo Jr. in elementary school, she asked me to serve as her interpreter.

Worthy (2006) points out that for non-English speaking parents, not knowing the language of the place where they have established their new lives makes them feel handicapped and isolated. This was true for Adriana, as well. But Adriana relied on the above mentioned

language mediators to overcome her feelings of being handicapped and to make contact with the school system. She looked forward to finding an interpreter to help her with tasks like registering her children in the elementary school or visiting the doctor's office. If she could not find a mediator, it was almost impossible for her to communicate with English speakers. One problem with these interactions is that the information Adriana received depended on the accuracy of the interpretations.

**Information networks and community building.** In order to corroborate the information she received, Adriana had a network system that helped her to confirm that the information was accurate and appropriate. Through this oral communication she developed her understanding the school system (Purcell-Gates, 1995). She listened to other family members' and friends' experiences to learn about resources helpful for her. For instance, she mentioned that she went to the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) office, where she interacted with other Mexican women living in the area. During the time they waited in the office, they shared and compared their experiences with social services and their children's schools.

From the findings of this pilot study, I became fascinated with the different resources Adriana used to make contact with her children's school and the different ways she had of corroborating and making sense of the information. From my contact with Adriana, two research questions emerged: 1) What kinds of communication channels are used by Mexican parents to interact with their children's schools? 2) How do immigrant mothers learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement in the United States?

### **The Crossing the Border through Service-Learning Program**

My findings from the pilot study with Adriana confirmed my informal observations of the women in the Crossing the Border literacy program, made when I served as the graduate

assistant for the program. The families in the program attended monthly meetings that served as a support for literacy for the children and as an opportunity for the mothers to learn English. The students in the program, the majority of whom were Spanish majors, served as cultural and language mediators for the Mexican and Honduran families. In addition, during these meetings, the women in the program shared issues about the school system, parenting, and everyday challenges that they experienced when living in a foreign culture. The support network system developed by the women in the program was similar to the one described by Adriana when attending the WIC (Women, Infant and Children) office. From the informal conversations in the service-learning class, I developed a third research question: How Mexican immigrant mothers describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?

In conclusion, revisiting these three experiences described above helped me to narrow the focus and the purpose of this research. I developed an overarching objective I would like to pursue, with three questions that I investigated:

How do Mexican immigrant parents with low income make sense of the school system in the United States?

Research Questions:

1. What communication channels are available between Mexican parents and their children's schools?
2. How do immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parents interaction in the United States?
3. How do Mexican immigrant parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?

## Summary

In the context of the No Child Left Behind Reform and the need for accountability, significant emphasis has been placed on the theme of parental involvement. Parental involvement can be seen as critical and might be one solution to improving student achievement. But there are several problems complicating the relationship between the Latino parents and the school personnel. Problems like different understandings of what exactly counts as parental involvement, a *schoolcentric* notion of parental involvement, and a cultural misunderstanding between the schools and the Latino parents hinder a reciprocal relationship that could benefit the children, the parents, and ultimately the community.

The NCLB reform makes it mandatory for the schools to develop strategies to promote strategies of parental involvement. However, the literature on minority parents and their families' strategies of involvement is far from complete. My aim is to contribute to a growing but still limited understanding of Mexican immigrant parents with a low proficiency of English and low income, by examining how parents try to make sense of the school system, and therefore their practices of involvement, and to add to developing theories on parental involvement. My purpose is to bring forward the voices of immigrant Mexican parents to include their perspectives within the research of parental involvement.

The document is organized as follows: In Chapter Two I review the body of literature regarding parental involvement specific to Latino immigrant parents. Chapter Three explains the need for a qualitative research methodology, one that can bring a holistic understanding of Latino immigrant parents and their practices of involvement. In Chapter Four, I present the findings from the study. I answer the research questions and present the cases of three mothers and a father: Helena, Sandra, Jose Luis and Mercedes, and their practices of involvement.

Chapter five discusses major conclusions from this qualitative research and directions for future research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I review the body of literature pertaining to research regarding parental involvement of Latino immigrants. This review of literature has three main sections. In the first part, I review the existing literature that voices Latino immigrant parents' perspectives on involvement. I explore the various ways in which Latino parents are involved in their children's education outside the boundaries of the classroom. In the second part, given the extensive research done in programs that foster a relationship with Latino immigrant parents, I examine successful programs that foster a positive relationship with Latino parents with low income. I do so under the premise that reports on successful programs might bring some enlightenment about parent-school relations, and how Latino immigrant parents make sense of schools in the United States. In the third part, I address the fact that although there are examples of programs that can foster positive relationships between schools and parents, those programs have been developed in places of traditional Latino settlement (Villenas, 2007), such as California, Texas, Arizona, and Colorado. In this study, I would like to address the gap that exists for similar studies in new areas of settlement. The conclusion of the chapter will outline the importance of this study and set the stage for a discussion of methodology relevant for my research questions on chapter three.

I organize the literature under three main assumptions: 1) there is a disconnect between White, middle class expectations about parental involvement and Latino parents' consideration of what counts as involvement; 2) language barriers are not the only difficulty immigrant parents face in order to be involved in the schools; and 3) despite the many challenges they face, Latino immigrant parents often manage to establish a relationship with the schools, although this relationship might differ from that expected by the mainstream United States society.

**Background**

Due to historical transformations the relationship between schools, families, and communities has dramatically changed since the 1950’s. For example, in the 60’s more women gained access to further and varied educational opportunities, entering and staying longer in the workforce. As a result, more educated parents became involved in the schooling experiences of their children and in the decision-making process of the schools (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). This historical change resulted in new ways that schools and communities relate to each other.

In the 70’s, the experience with effective school movements caught the attention of researchers and educators. Parental involvement was added to the list of strategies that can facilitate students’ success and contribute to academic achievement. The idea of fostering parental involvement became relevant and new programs such as Head Start, Follow Through, and Title I were implemented for the purpose of legislating and regulating the involvement of low income parents in their children’s education (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Since then, the literature in the field of parental involvement has become extensive.

Research non-specific to Latino students has focused on the relationship between parental involvement and school achievement. With an emphasis in describing the different strategies for parents to support their children’s schooling experiences, such as helping with homework and attending school events. Although I am not addressing this research, in the following table I present some of the empirical research done in the above themes.

Table 2

*Main Trends in Parental Involvement Research*

Main Themes	Researchers
Strategies to support children school	E.g. Adams & Christenson, 1998; Clark, 1993;

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<p>experiences: helping with homework, attending school events, parenting and children socialization.</p>	<p>Epstein, 1991; Grusec, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey &amp; Sandler, 1995; Jeynes, 2003; Shaver &amp; Walls, 1998; Xu &amp; Corno, 2003</p>
<p>Relationship between parental involvement and school achievement.</p>	<p>E. g. Balli, Demo &amp; Wedman, 1998; Barnard, 2004; Cooper, Lindsay, &amp; Nye, 2000; Grolni, Benjet, Kurowski, &amp; Apostoleris, 1997; Henderson &amp; Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Depmsey, Bassler, &amp; Burow, 1995;</p>

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However, research has shown the need for a different approach when addressing parental involvement among Latino immigrant parents. Latino immigrant parents who move to the United States for economic reasons face a number of challenges when they arrive in a new place. Parents live under the shadow of language barriers, a limited knowledge or understanding of school policies, and different expectations from schools concerning what counts as parental involvement (Olsen, 2000; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Waterman, 2008; Worthy, 2006). Additionally, economic immigrants face the burdens of living with low income and a low socioeconomic status. Latino parents with low income tend to have little schooling in their home country, entering into the low-wage/low skilled workforce (García Coll, et al., 2002). In the following section, I summarize research that describes how parents deal with multiple family responsibilities and stay involved in their children’s education.

### **Teaching Lessons Outside of the Classroom**

Elenes et al, (2001) point out that learning occurs in unexpected places and through nontraditional literacy practices. They argue that mothers are the first and lifelong teachers, since

they shape with their experiences the memory of the community. Significant learning occurs in popular culture such as *corridos* (popular music), *refranes* (popular sayings), *dichos* (sayings), and storytelling. These researchers advocate for critical pedagogies that can understand and recognize places where learning occurs outside the confines of the classroom. Similar to nontraditional literacy practices of learning, research has shown that immigrant parents engage in nontraditional practices of parental involvement (Elenes, et al., 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2001; Lawson, 2001; Reese, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001; Waterman, 2008).

Immigrant parents bring with them a personal understanding of norms, roles, values, ways of being, and expectations of appropriate practices of parental involvement (Reese, 2003). Differences in how immigrant parents involve themselves in their children's education might create the impression that they are not involved (Waterman, 2008). Several researchers have argued that immigrant parents who seem to not be involved in fact develop strategies of involvement that are not easy for teachers to recognize (Epstein & Sanders; Hoover-Dempsey, et. al., 2005; Lawson, 2001). One main difference is that Latino parents are concerned about teaching moral values, good manners and good behavior, particularly *respeto* (Elenes, et al., 2001; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001). For example, in her ethnographic study with 10 Mexican immigrant families, Valdés (1996) found that the parents did not have the educational background to become academic partners or support their children's academic requirements. However, Latino parents believe that teaching manners and good behavior is a way of supporting the teacher's and the school's mission. One mother from Mexico interviewed by Waterman (2008) explains:

I believe that my role is to educate my children, to teach them to pay attention to the teachers, and for me to also tell the teachers what I know about my children. And in these ways, it will be easier for the teachers, and my children will capture more of what is being taught, too (p. 154).

An example of the kind of values-based parental involvement from some Mexican families can be seen in Lopez's (2001) in which he describes the lessons from the Padilla family whose children were in the top 10% of their class. He points out that the Padilla parents were not involved with their children's education in the traditional American way. However, the Padillas instilled in their children the value of school by modeling the experience of hard work. The Padilla parents believed that hard work, which for them was the clue to success. The children were exposed to working in the fields with their parents at a young age. The Padilla parents believe that by learning how hard farm work was, they would make a choice of working hard at school. By exposing their children to agricultural work, the Padilla parents taught them three fundamental lessons in their particular way: 1) understand the nature of the hard work their parents have to do, 2) recognize that working in the fields is difficult and it does not receive adequate compensation, and 3) realize that without an education they will end up in the same type of job their parents have.

### **Intersections with Race, Class and Gender**

Parental involvement of Latino immigrant parents transcends the limits of the school and the needs of the teachers (Lawson, 2003). Valdés (1996) regards class as a category of analysis. The families in her ethnographic study focused their efforts on assuring the wellness of the family. The family efforts were driven as household-centered rather than child-centered.

Therefore, all time and financial resources were allocated to caring for the household as a unit, instead of thinking about individual efforts for supporting each child to have educational success.

Moreover, researchers have argued that cultural differences in parental involvement are also intersected by class and gender (Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). In her study, Villenas (2001) explains how well intentioned service providers and school personnel described Latina mothers within the discourse of minority and poverty, looking at them through the deficit model frame, or what Villenas has called *benevolent racism*. Because of their socioeconomic background and literacy level, service providers placed mothers as “needing” parental skills and English proficiency, and as inherently oppressed by Latino males. Conversely, Villenas found that mothers situate, in the space of their narration, their traditional values and the education of their home countries as superior (Villenas, 2001), meaning that they have the social skills of etiquette, loyalty to the family, and most importantly *respeto* (Valdés, 1996).

In the context of gender, the women in Villenas’ (2001) study also contested the stereotype that places Latino women as intrinsically subjugated by machismo. According to Villenas, Latino women did not see themselves in an oppressive genderized division of labor. For the Latinas in her study, being a mother and doing housework was not oppressive, as long as men continue to perform *men’s work*, which meant caring for the family economically and emotionally. The Latino women in Villenas’ study took pride in themselves, their motherhood, and their moral values, and in doing so, challenged the deficit model imposed by media and social services.

### **Parents’ Negotiations of Cultural Practices**

Although it is important to consider cultural differences between immigrant Latino parents and the mainstream population, several researchers have cautioned about incorporating

stereotypical assumptions of Latino culture in defining parental involvement (Amanti, 2005; Reese, 2003). Reese (2003) argues that a static definition of culture makes it difficult to understand differences within or between cultures, or what Rosaldo (1993) defined as *cultural borderlands* (as cited in Reese, 2003, p. 31). In his ethnographic research, Reese found that parents accommodate<sup>4</sup> to their new life by incorporating both the experiences they bring from the home country and the new ways of living in their new environment. Parents learn to negotiate their personal understanding of educational values in contrast to the values of their new homeland, which in most cases significantly differ from their experiences growing up. Reese (2003) points out that parents “choose from a variety of culturally available childrearing strategies” (p. 53), not only from their own repertoire, but from those that are now available to them.

In the intersections of ethnicity, class, gender and cultural negotiations, immigrant Latino parents’ practices of involvement focus on teaching lessons to cope with life challenges (Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). For example, Villenas and Moreno (2001) discuss how mothers from Mexico, Central and South America teach cultural pride in a society that often disallows them. Latino immigrant mothers have to face the challenges of living a life as immigrant workers dealing with anti-immigrant laws and xenophobia, in addition to facing the burdens of economic scarcity. Mothers in this study teach their daughters contradictory ideas, they teach them to be a *mujer de hogar* (woman of the home) while at the same time they instill their daughters to *valerse por sí misma* (to be self-reliant). Latina mothers “teach daughters to be

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the chapter I use the term accommodation. Accommodation refers to those strategies that Latino immigrant parents develop in order to adapt to their new life in the United States (Olmedo, 2003). Olmedo (2003) points out that some immigrant parents try to assimilate to the mainstream society; trying to become Americans they put aside their native language and cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile others adjust to the new life by learning the context of the mainstream culture while at the same time they reaffirm their values, customs, and language. Olmedo argues that accommodation and resistance are not dichotomous phenomena but strategies that parents use to negotiate mainstream expectations and resistance. Parents that opt to accommodate into the mainstream society create spaces where they can reaffirm and support their familial values.

submissive, rebellious, and conforming, all at the same time as they maneuver between race, patriarchy, and capitalism” (Villenas & Moreno, 2001, p. 671). The authors exemplify how in the core of alternative literacy practices and teaching lessons based on their life experiences; and how the mothers in the study question the traditions.

Moreover, in an ethnographic research study, Espinoza-Herold (2007) portrays the case study of Carla, a Mexican immigrant young woman, from a family with low income, who reentered formal schooling after having dropped out for two years. Carla became the first person in her family to graduate from both high school and a four-year college institution. Espinoza-Herold examines how Carla incorporated references to her mother’s *dichos* (sayings) as she pursued her education and how those lessons related to her academic success. Carla’s success story exemplifies how Mexican immigrant mothers help their children overcome challenges in ways that go beyond finding time in their work schedule.

Immigrant parents live the realities of subsisting with little income, struggling to speak English, and having a non-citizen status (Reese, 2002). Newcomers have to live in inner city neighborhoods that are characterized by high-crime rates, gang activity, and insecurity (DeGaetano, 2007; Lawson, 2001, Reese, 2003, Villenas, 2001). Therefore, parents use a variety of strategies to meet specific needs in their new setting. Reese (2003) found out that the strategies parents use to protect their children in inner city neighborhoods in Los Angeles contrast dramatically with the type of parental involvement expected by the schools. In the study, sometimes the Latino parents adapt the cultural norms of the United States, encouraging children to attend school activities like soccer games or afterschool programs. At other times, the family accommodates itself to other demands. For example, in order to protect the children from gangs,

parents would not allow them to go outside the house, do outdoor activities like camping, or to attend sleepovers.

### **Schools' Efforts to Reach Parents**

Several researchers have reported that teachers in the school believe immigrant parents are hard to reach, inattentive, and uninvolved (Crozier & Davies, 2005; Lawson, 2001). In fact, Lawson (2001) and Crozier and Davies (2005) report that immigrant parents believe they are little involved, or at least not involved in the ways schools would prefer. This results in tension between parents' and teachers' expectations that are difficult to reconcile. Nonetheless, in their research with parents of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin living in England, Crozier and Davies (2005) found out that immigrant parents did not have sufficient knowledge about the educational system to become involved. These parents trusted that teachers were professionals and experts in the field of education. Immigrant parents expected the teachers to initiate parent-teacher contact, and viewed this as a sign that the teachers cared about their children.

Moreover, Crozier and Davies (2005) found that parents from Pakistan and Bangladesh were not as hard to reach as the teachers reported. From the parents' perspective, it seemed that some school practices were in fact inhibiting them from becoming involved. For instance, there was little understanding or recognition, on the side of the teachers, about the immigrant community's needs and parents' expectations. Teachers seemed to have low expectations about the ability of immigrant parents to become adequately involved. Research has shown that when teachers have low expectations about parents, it is more difficult to interest them in participating (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Kuperminc et al., 2007).

Including diverse perspectives in schools can be challenging (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Embracing immigrant Latino parents and their practices of involvement can be hard as well.

Therefore, we cannot forget that the relationship between low income immigrant Latino parents and schools is entangled within the intersections of race, class, gender, country of origin, and language, which means competing notions of parental involvement. In this section, I examine a series of successful programs that support immigrant parents' efforts to become involved in the school system, despite deficit notions that assume that immigrant parents are not involved or unable to become involved.

Nieto and Bode (2008) point out that multicultural education entails challenging privilege and power. In the relationship between teachers and immigrant parents with low income, privilege and power is mostly on the teachers' side. Therefore, I selected programs that make an effort to actively listen to the Latino parents, take into account their needs and expectations, and acknowledge their ways of understanding what is good for their children. The programs that I present have similar characteristics, such as bringing the voice of the community into the school, consideration of cultural differences, and an understanding of the sociocultural context of the parents. In addition, they present different solutions for some of the many challenges that immigrant parents face when trying to reach the schools.

### **Lessons from High Performing Schools with Large Migrant Populations**

Working with immigrant populations can be stressful for teachers (Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichchana, 2001). Low income immigrant families face multiple challenges: earning below the poverty level, having to move constantly, and having difficulties communicating in English, to mention a few. However, Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) found that students' performance ratings at Hispanic schools along the border between Mexico and Texas, were the highest in the state. In their findings, they describe that the successes at these schools were the result in part of school personnel's efforts to create a welcoming environment for the families.

To support parents, the school administrators based their outreach strategies on cultural understanding, personal contact and communication, and structural accommodations. In a follow-up study, Lopez et al. (2001) examined the lessons from four effective migrant-impacted school districts summarized below.

A complex problem in parent-school relations is that teachers and school administrators are not always aware of the harsh economic realities facing economic immigrant families (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Lopez, et al. (2001) point out that in a high performing, immigrant-impacted school district, the success of their parental involvement programs rely on fostering and providing a welcoming environment to parents. In this case, the school district was open to adapting to the needs of immigrant parents without stigmatizing, condemning, or viewing parents through a deficit model.

Lopez et al. (2001) describe parental involvement strategies that are supportive of seasonal immigrants. For example, migrant recruiters and program directors encourage children that frequently relocate to take the required standardized tests, to prevent children failing a grade because of differences in the curriculum. The schools also provided parents with classes about the number of credits necessary for children to graduate, English as a Second Language (ESL), citizenship preparation, and other technical skills courses “to provide parents with concrete skills that can broaden the repertoire of human/family capital” (p. 275).

The success in these parental involvement programs resulted from school personnel focused on achieving an understanding of the complex economic situations in which immigrant parents with low income live, and on efforts to empower parents to take responsibility for their own children’s academic success. The school functioned as a networking system that provided information and resources, and developed collaborative efforts with community agencies to help

parents cover their immediate needs. School personnel reinforced the idea that children's needs go beyond economic and physical. Immigrant parents' burdens were mitigated with the support of the school, and as a result, "parents begin to view their involvement in a much broader fashion" (Lopez, et al. 2001, p. 270).

The school district provides an example of the possibilities of developing a caring relationship with the parents (Noddings, 1992). Caring for the families allow the school personnel to work with them without losing dignity and respect for their needs (Lopez, et al. 2001; Noddings, 1992). Moreover, the staff working with immigrant parents exemplifies Rosbery's et al. (2001) work that states that in order to challenge deficit notions, teachers, staff, and administrators must learn to appreciate the community empathetically. Schools purposefully organize home visits to gain knowledge about the families' socioeconomic background. Besides, many of the staff personnel have been immigrants themselves and related to the experience of the parents, helping prevent the idea that immigrant Latino parents lack the ability and the interest to become involved (Lopez, et al., 2001).

In conclusion, the school personnel in this case, rather than establishing a relationship with the parents that depends on teacher's expectations, opt to support parents' efforts by helping to ameliorate their financial burdens. In contrast to a *schoolcentric* notion of parental involvement (Lawson, 2003), the school district purposefully went beyond their duty in an attempt to reach the parents. In this way, the school personnel care for the families and supported parents' efforts to provide for the families well being and scaffold parents involvement with the schools.

**Home Visits: A Funds of Knowledge Approach.**

In the literature, programs like those described by Lopez et al. (2001) do not focus on understanding immigrant family backgrounds. Researchers have pointed out that children from diverse backgrounds experience disconnects between the world at home and the world at school (Ballenger, 1999; Purcel-Gates, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993). According to Moll (2004), families of historically marginalized communities, like Latinos in Arizona, have a background in knowledge and skills that is ignored or devalued by institutions, specifically schools. Schools are uncomfortable places, because children cannot show what they know in ways that the teachers recognize (Rosebery et al., 2001). Therefore, a *funds of knowledge* approach proposes a revision of the concept of home visits, one that uses an ethnographic methodology to help teachers learn about Latino families' cultural background (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005).

Although home visits are not new in teachers' practices, the difference in the funds of knowledge approach is a radical change in teachers' engagement with the community (González et al., 2005). Traditionally, the accepted procedure of home visits is to discuss children's problems, to provide suggestions to the family on how to help students with homework, and/or to distribute books and supplies. González et al. (2005) proposes that teachers engage in *research visits*. These research visits consist of performing observations and interviews that help teachers perceive events and practices in the core of students' households that cannot be learned on the surface of dances, food, or folklore (González et al., 2005).

Viewing households within a processual view of culture, rooted in the lived context and practices of their students and families, engendered a realization that culture is a dynamic concept and not a static grab bag of tamales, quinceañeras, and cinco de mayo [*sic*] celebrations. (p. 99)

Moll et al. (2005) explain that incorporating research visits enhances teachers' understanding of the multilayered-dimension of the immigrant household, meaning the social and cultural context of the families from actual personal participation. Therefore, research visits allow teachers to gain knowledge of the home and community, to incorporate this knowledge into the classroom. Teachers become learners and practitioners at the same time (González et al., 2005).

The aim of the research visits is to open the possibility for teachers in the community to transform their teaching practice in two ways. First, the research visits facilitate the opportunity for teachers to understand students' funds of knowledge and to incorporate them into the curriculum. Second, they create improved, functional understanding of the household, to challenge deficit assumptions of immigrant parents. Research visits and ethnographic reflection enable change in teachers' attitudes and behaviors, foster a relationship between the households and the schools, and allow better relationships between parents and teachers (González, et al., 2005).

In this case, research visits further the understanding of the socioeconomic and cultural realities of parents with low income. By engaging in research visits, teachers learn to appreciate the cultural background of minority students and their families. By doing so they are able to incorporate changes in the curriculum that bridge the gap between the world of school and the realities of students at home. Moreover, in terms of parental involvement, learning about the families' funds of knowledge permits teachers and school personnel to understand Latino parents' non-traditional literacy and practices of involvement.

### **Parent's Collaboration with the School**

Overall, one problem with parent-school relations is to develop strategies that can address the needs of the parents, rather than only fulfilling the needs of the school (Lawson, 2001; Lightfoot, 2004). In their article, Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) describe the experience of a group of immigrant Latino parents who organized themselves independently from the school.

[The parents] had the goal of providing an independent avenue for school participation for a growing number of low-income, mainly immigrant families who were often seen as disengaged from their children's schooling (p. 33).

This group of parents from the San Francisco Bay area participated in "La Familia," an initiative to promote positive change in their children's education. As with many other Latino children, students in this school district were performing below average in comparison to their classmates of American European descent. Latino students were underrepresented in advance placement for middle school and high school courses, and overrepresented with regard to disciplinary actions (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004).

The La Familia initiative began with a small gathering of eight concerned parents in a middle school. In their first meetings, parents agreed on simple organization principles and asked help from a non-profit organization specialized in parent involvement. Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) documented the evolution of the parents' initiative for two years, from its inception until the organization of a regional conference attended by 250 Latino immigrant parents from five participant schools. Ramirez (2003) points out that lack of communication and competing notions of parental involvement are common between parents and teachers in the schools. Before the La Familia initiative, this case was not the exception. Parents experienced disappointment because they felt a lack of communication with the teachers. Parents perceived that with no language translation provided by the school, parent-teacher conferences were a waste of time for

non English-speaking parents. On the other hand, teachers expressed frustration in their efforts to bring parents to programs and activities. Although the school had an official liaison person, parents were not present in the activities organized by the school (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004).

The La Familia initiative was successful because its precepts were relevant to both the families and the schools. For example, Latino parents attach great meaning to the concept of *convivencia*<sup>5</sup>. For low income, recently immigrated, hard working parents, La Familia provided a space where they could reestablish community ties, and could have a moment for social interaction. On the school side, the principal was convinced of the importance of parent's participation and was open to developing a partnership with the families. Schools, teachers, and parents reconciled their views about school, teachers, and parents developing together joint strategies to solve problems affecting their children.

Although the initiative was successful, other cases have documented Latinos' efforts to overcome policies and practices that exclude Latino children from educational opportunities (Abrams & Taylor Gibbs, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Olivos, 2006). However, all point out that structural accommodations need to occur in order to incorporate Latinos in a broader fashion. For instance, Abrams and Taylor Gibbs (2002) assert that practices of involvement are linked to large social and cultural reproduction process that limits Latino parents' inclusion.

In conclusion, the La Familia initiative is an example of grassroots activism that emerged from the needs of the parents and their efforts to support their children's schooling. By organizing themselves, the parents were able to construct their roles as involved parents, gain respect in the community, and affirm their cultural values. The latter is of particular importance since parents' ways of organization were rooted in specific cultural notions of how to organize

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<sup>5</sup> As Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) point out there is no perfect or simple translation to the word *convivencia*, they have defined it as the following: "*Convivencia* refers to the flowing moments of collective creation and solidarity, the bonding that developed form a joint emerging moral quest against the backdrop of experiential sharing" (p. 35).

themselves. Their ideas of organizing were self-driven, because they were pertinent and significant to them.

### **Learning English with a Purpose**

One of the biggest challenges of Latino immigrant parents is not being able to become proficient in the language of the country in which they have established their new lives. Learning English is not only a personal problem but it has become a political issue (Olsen, 2000). English-only supporters have argued that the limited English proficiency of immigrant children results in low achievement, although research does not support this (Worthy, 2006). Researchers have described many situations where parents' limited proficiency in English has prevented them from becoming involved in their children's education, but not for the same reason English-only advocates promote. In a study that included interviews with 13 immigrant parents of Latin American origin, Worthy (2006) found that parents could get by on a daily basis with limited English proficiency. Nonetheless, all parents interviewed by Worthy believed that learning English could enhance the overall quality of their lives.

Learning English is a priority for immigrant parents. Acquiring proficiency in English is a way to support homework and communicate effectively with teachers (Worthy, 2006). Waterman (2008) points out that despite the multiple ESL classes taught in public schools, educators do not consider teaching ESL classes an opportunity to support parental involvement. Therefore, Waterman designed a curriculum for a school-based adult ESL program that included parental involvement knowledge in the ESL classes. Waterman compared the experience of other groups attending ESL classes, with those that completed the ESL-parental involvement program. Waterman found that the mothers that followed the curriculum that emphasized parental involvement became significantly more proficient in English, in contrast to those that did not

receive the same instruction. Mothers in the regular ESL classroom reported to have learned some words and pronunciation, but their efforts to be involved in their children's schooling experience remained invisible to teachers and school staff. On the other hand, the mothers that participated in the parental involvement curriculum gained knowledge that helped them support their children's school success.

Waterman (2008) points out, that language barriers are not the only obstacle parents face in order to become involved in their children's school. In Waterman's study, the mothers reported feeling they had limited understanding of the ways children were taught in the school, were not familiar with the curriculum, and had little awareness of how the school system works in the United States. The success of the parental involvement curriculum program was not only in helping mothers learn English. However, most valuable to them was learning the skills and the knowledge they needed to communicate effectively with the teachers, school personnel, and principal. Besides, they learned practices of involvement that resonate with those expected by the schools, making their parent involvement efforts more viable and visible to the school.

Delgado-Gaitan (1991) points out that not having the sociocultural knowledge to become involved in schools results in isolation for parents, in particular those with limited English proficiency. The mothers that followed the curriculum of parental involvement gained the social and cultural capital to communicate effectively with the school. Waterman (2008) points out that adult learning is more effective when it relates to goals that are authentic to the students. In this example, language acquisition was focused on contextualizing the curriculum towards the parental involvement needs of the Latino mothers. In this way, the mothers gain language proficiency in English and the sociocultural knowledge to communicate more effectively with the school.

### **The New Latino Diaspora**

According to a recent report from the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of Latino children living in the United States has doubled in the last 30 years. The number of children of Latin American background increased from 9% of the total population in 1980 to 22% in 2007 (Fry & Passel, 2009). This change evidences a different configuration of Latinos living in the country. For instance, “[in] 1980, only three-in-ten Latino children were second generation, while nearly six-in-ten were in the third generation or higher” (Fry & Passel, 2009, p. i). In 2009 the majority of the 16 million Latino children are now second generation of immigrants.

The population statistics for Latino children also point out changes in the data related to the parents. First- (11%) and second- (52%) generation of Latino children are the “sons or the daughters of at least one foreign-born parent, typically someone who came to this country in the immigration wave from Mexico, Central America and South America that began around 1980” (Fry & Passel, 2009, p. i). From the statistics, we can infer that at least 63% of the parents of those Latino children who are first- or second-generation immigrants need to learn how to navigate within the school system in the United States.

In the previous section, I portrayed the experiences of Latino immigrants living in areas with a long history of Hispanic immigration and participating in schools’ programs and initiatives. Initiatives have been developed in geographic areas where Latinos have lived for years and/or have a tradition of a constant flux of Latino immigration, such as California, Texas, Arizona, and Colorado. However, in recent years, the outgrowing number of Latinos in the United States resulted in newcomers settling down temporarily or permanently in places that do not have a tradition of receiving Latino immigrants. Some of these new immigration hubs include North Carolina, Maine, Georgia, Indiana, and Arkansas, as well as rural communities in

Illinois, Colorado, and Virginia (Hirschman & Massey, 2008; Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002; Murillo & Villenas, 1997; Winders, 2005). Traditional places of immigration such as California and New York became less dominant in the 1990s (Massey & Capoferro, 2008), while new destinations in the South showed increased Latino immigration (Hirschman & Massey, 2008). As Hirschman and Massey (2008) point out: “The increasing diversity of immigrant settlement is inextricably bound up with the growing volume of immigration” (p. 3).

Villenas (2007) states that this *New Latino Diaspora* (Murillo & Villenas, 1997) faces a number of challenges in the process of accommodating to the new place. For instance, schools are not prepared to help immigrant Latino children to overcome economic and social challenges (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilas, 2005). A common practice for providing English language services to Latino children is the one of pulling out students from regular classes to take English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons. However, this practice often disrupts students’ acquisition of content knowledge (Hamman et al., 2001).

This emerging Latino community establishes new relationships with long time residents; a process that unavoidably faces conflict (Villenas, 2007). For instance, the presence of people arriving from Latin America challenges the understanding of the southern identity creating tensions between Latino newcomers with long time residents (Winders, 2007). Winders (2008) explains: “Indeed, the arrival of Latin Americans, a population that fits uneasily within a black-white racial taxonomy, raises new questions about southern race relations and racial categories more broadly” (p. 252). In fact, the relationships with the schools are also determined by those interethnic interactions already in place before Latino immigrants arrived, such as, White and Black interactions (Hamman et al., 2002). Despite this, Latino newcomers arrive in new places of immigration where the anti-Latino sentiment is not deeply rooted, given the relatively new

presence of Latinos (Hamman et al., 2002). As Villenas (2007) points out, relationships between the schools and the community are still in constant flux.

In the context of school achievement, Hamman, Wortham, and Murillo (2004) assess that young Latinos in these new settlement areas are following traditional patterns of school dropout and over representation in lower tracks. At the same time, the authors assert that we know little about the educational experiences of children of the New Latino Diaspora. Some efforts to gain insight about those experiences have been documented. For instance, Hamann (2003) described the experiences of Latinos in a Georgia school district that sought to respond to the educational needs of Latino newcomers, mostly Mexicans. Wortham, Murillo, and Hamman (2001) compiled case studies from various locations in order to analyze “how Diaspora Latinos find themselves constructed by members of the receiving communities and how they assert their identities in response” (p. 2).

In terms of parental involvement practices Tinley (2006) portrays the schooling experience of a family in Alabama. She describes the differences in the attitude between elementary school and middle school teachers towards immigrants. Elementary school teachers perceived the children as the future of the community and, therefore, tried to assimilate them into it. On the contrary, middle school teachers viewed the children as a problem, and did not develop any after-school programs or supporting strategies to welcome or incorporate Latino parents and children into the community. She points out that educational development depends on how the community accepts new immigrants and their interest in opening special programs to serve the needs of immigrant children. She argues that in the state of Alabama, immigrant parents and children were discouraged by the attitudes of teachers once the children were in middle school. The parents felt they did not have clear reasons to encourage their children’s education in a

system that they considered hostile and discriminatory. From the parents' perspective, once their children were in 8th grade, their children had already completed more than they would have done in Mexico. As a result, these children ended up dropping out of school.

In another study, Bohon et al. (2005) describe the educational barriers that new immigrant communities face in the state of Georgia. In their research, they address diverse problems that Latino youngsters face while integrating into the American educational system. Some of these challenges include: little or limited support for Latino students' needs, structural barriers for Latino students to pursue higher education, few incentives to finish high school, and frequent relocation of the families. In terms of parental involvement, Bohon et al. (2005) point out that parents have little understanding of the Georgia school system. Furthermore, parents fail to meet teachers' and administrators' expectations of parental involvement, and have financial constraints that force them to pull out their children from school. In this study, parents also face language barriers in communicating with the schools' administrators and teachers. On the other hand, Bohon et al. (2005) report that the teachers perceive disinterest on the side of the parents, who do not respond to teachers' attempts to communicate with them. Therefore, "both parents and teachers expressed frustration in their inability to bridge the gap between school and family in a way that would keep children enrolled in school, thinking about college, and performing at a high level" (p. 50).

Tinley (2006) and Bohon et al. (2005) discuss the challenges that Latino parents face in Alabama's and Georgia's educational systems. Bohon et al. indicates that the challenges can be diverse and could foreshadow Latino students' efforts to continue with their education. Although, the work of these researchers helps to understand the experiences of the New Latino Diaspora children, more research is needed to specifically depict parent-schools relationships

from the parent's point of view. The aim of this dissertation is to partially respond to this need through the description of these relationships and the formulation of theory.

### **Summary**

This chapter presents an overview of the literature on parental involvement of immigrant Latino parents. Research has shown that Latino immigrant parents face multiple challenges when moving to a new place. Economic immigrants have to deal with scarce economic resources, anti-immigrant laws, xenophobia and the personal sadness of losing their countries and community ties. However, despite the multiple challenges, the literature in the field has demonstrated that Latino parents still manage to be involved in their children's education. Immigrant parents know about hard work and living at the margins of the society. Therefore, they believe that education will bring a better future for their children.

Researchers point out the differences between institutional practices of involvement and parents' understanding of how to get involved in their children's education. Immigrant Latino parents' practices of involvement are determined by their cultural understanding of what it means to be involved. At the center of Latino parents' concern is teaching moral values, good manners, and good behavior, particularly *respeto*. Moreover, researchers have argued that cultural differences in parental involvement are also intersected by class and gender. Economic immigrant Latino parents do not have the educational background to become academic partners or support their children's academic endeavors. Through non-traditional literacy practices Latino parents teach their children how to overcome barriers in a society determined by class exploitation and racial discrimination. Latino parents teach lessons that help their children to overcome challenges, which overpass the confines and limits of the classroom.

My review of parental involvement practices of immigrant Latino parents shows that they learn to negotiate their personal understanding of educational values with those values of the new homeland. Although it is important to consider cultural differences between immigrant Latino parents and the mainstream population, several researchers have cautioned about incorporating stereotypical assumptions of Latino culture. Researchers agree that in order to accommodate to the new environment parents use a variety of strategies to meet specific needs in the new setting. For example, parents learn to negotiate between the child rearing strategies they know and those that are available to them in the new place.

I also examined a series of successful programs that support immigrant parents' efforts to get involved in the school system, despite deficit notions that assume that immigrant parents are not involved or unable to become involved. I drew attention to the many challenges Latinos face in the United States. Despite the complex situations, these programs present different solutions for some of the obstacles that immigrant parents face when trying to reach the schools. I selected cases that make an effort to actively listen to the Latino parents, that take into account their needs and expectations, and that acknowledge their ways of understanding of what is good for their children.

The programs that I presented demonstrate that there is not a single strategy or easy solution to address the complexity of the relationship between Latino immigrant parents and the schools. The cases address the needs of the parents in a variety of ways such as bringing the voice of the community into the school, acknowledging cultural differences, and understanding the sociocultural context of the parents. The programs try to bridge the gap between the school and the parents, and to support the needs of the Latino community. These efforts demonstrate

that when schools are open to diversity, cultural difference, and pluralism, a door is opened for the inclusion of minority parents into the school.

Although these programs can foster positive relationships between schools and parents, I highlighted the fact that those programs have been developed in places of traditional Latino settlement, such as California, Texas, Arizona, and Colorado. In recent years researchers have described the trend of Latinos settling down temporarily or permanently in places that do not have a tradition of receiving Latino immigrants. Some of these places are North Carolina, Maine, Georgia, Indiana, Arkansas, and rural communities in Illinois, Colorado and Virginia. Although some researchers have documented the educational experiences of Latinos settling down in new places of immigrations more research is needed to understand the context of recent immigrant Latino families.

The research I propose will address the need to specifically depict the interaction between immigrant parents and the school system, from the parent's point of view. These relationships are key forces in shaping the educational experiences of Latinos in new places of immigrations. As I outlined in chapter one, my purpose is to bring forward and document the voices of non-English speaking Mexican parents, and to propose a holistic theoretical framework to understand their experiences and practices of involvement. Furthermore, I seek to replace deficit notions regarding Latino parents' involvement in the school system by providing recommendations of how teachers can develop a relationship with the immigrant parents. In chapter three, I will explain the need for a qualitative research methodology, one that can bring a holistic understanding of Latino immigrant parents and their practices of involvement.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I start by explaining the need for a qualitative research methodology that can bring a holistic understanding of the context of Latino immigrant parents living in Southwest Virginia. Then, I propose a qualitative research methodology to address a need for contextual descriptive analysis. The chapter is divided into four main sections that help support my methodological decisions. The first section is a justification for the use of a qualitative methodology for the research. The second section explains the elements of the research design. The third one describes specifically the methods of data collection. Finally, in the last section I discuss how I analyze and interpret the data.

### **Justification for a Qualitative Research Design**

Qualitative research has been included in many philosophical traditions, as well as methodological techniques and practices (Mason, 2002; Merriam, 1998). Mason (2002) has identified some characteristics of qualitative research that help build a *working definition* of the key elements of qualitative research:

a) qualitative research is concerned about how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted; b) the methods of data generation are both flexible and sensitive to the social context in which the data is produced; c) qualitative research aims to understand the complexity, the details, and the context of the social processes, in order to build a *holistic* explanation of the phenomena. (p. 3)

Thus, I have selected a qualitative research approach to understand the social process of how Mexican immigrant parents make sense of the school system in Southwest Virginia. My aim is to bring forward and document the voice of non-English speaking parents to understand

their efforts in raising children in a school culture and in a country where the primary language is foreign to them. If we can understand minority parents' practices of involvement, we are more likely to bridge the gap between parents, teachers, and schools, and to build relationships that can benefit the community.

Qualitative methods are used to comprehend a social phenomenon by understanding *the meaning of the experience* (Mason, 2002), rather than “attempting to understand, for example, causal patterns by analyzing connections between static or snapshot variable[s]” (Merriam, 1998, p. 135). As Rosebery et al. (2001) point out, in order to understand the community, we need to find out how people use the resources they have available in their lives and how they learn to navigate different cultural systems. Consequently, a qualitative research approach supports the understanding of language minority Mexican parents considering their personal experiences in the social, political, and economic context of the family.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design best approaches and appropriately captures the multiple complexities of the relationship between the parents and the schools in Southwest Virginia. In this section, I outline a qualitative research design as completely as possible, in order to define the scope and describe a research strategy that better resonates with the purpose of the study. Although, Mason (2002) points out that qualitative research cannot predict all possible outcomes, she recommends beginning the process of collecting data with a strategy. For the most part, qualitative research decisions are “grounded in the practice, process and context of the research itself” (Mason, 2002, p. 24).

For the study, I have chosen to further the examination of the life-experiences of three mothers and a father living in Southwest Virginia for the following reasons: first, I chose to

study the experiences of Mexican nationals because of my Mexican background and my affinities with this particular national group. Furthermore, my prior research experiences and cultural background helped me to effectively communicate with the participants. The second reason is the large numbers of Mexicans that entered the United States in the last three decades. Already, the numbers of Mexicans living in the United States is estimated to be 12.7 million, comprising 32 percent of all immigrants (Pew Hispanic, 2009). Finally, researchers point out that research on the educational experiences of Mexican immigrant children in new places of immigration is far from complete. Therefore, a study of this type can provide valuable information to school personnel to understand the experiences and needs of Mexican and transnational families<sup>6</sup>. This insight can be used to develop programs to address the needs of Mexican parents living in areas of the New Latino Diaspora.

How do Mexican immigrant parents with low income make sense of the school system in the United States?

This objective is approached with three research questions that drive the study:

1. What communication channels are available between Mexican parents and their children's schools?
2. How do immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parents interaction in the United States?
3. How do Mexican immigrant parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?

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<sup>6</sup> Chavez (1994) refers to the As the Mexican population changes in the United States due to the immigration of documented or undocumented immigrants, there are a considerable number of *transnational families* (Chavez, 1994), meaning that one or both parents are of Mexican nationality and/or part of the nuclear family has stayed back in Mexico. Furthermore, Chavez (1994) also refers to transnational families to those families where some or all the children are US citizens and the parents have Mexican citizenship and have crossed the border undocumented.

### **Case Studies as Qualitative Research**

Many of the decisions of this qualitative research design were based on the insight I gained from my pilot study with Adriana, a Mexican mother living in the New River Valley area, and the informal observations I collected when participating in the service-learning program “Crossing the Border “(CTB). From the pilot study I learned that Adriana constantly looked for language mediators to help her contact with the school system. On the other hand, the participants in CTB found helpful the assistance students assigned to their homes provided. In this study, I wanted to expand on my observations, which suggest that the better the network system parents rely on to communicate with the school, the faster they can make sense of the educational system and learn how to navigate the school system in the United States. I decided to compare the cases of three mothers and a father. The first mother, Helena, participated throughout the CTB program while the second mother, Sandra, participated in the program for a couple of years and then dropped out. In the third case, Mercedes and her husband Jose Luis, are a couple that did not participate in the CTB program, at any time. All parents have children attending school in the United States.

### **Comparison Approach**

As Mason (2002) recommends, one way to understand better a phenomenon is to build a comparison between contexts:

“There are different methodological strategies for answering developmental puzzles.

They might involve drawing a comparison between contexts where a phenomenon has developed and others where it has not, or more likely where developments have taken different shapes and forms (p. 31).”

I want to build on my pilot study's preliminary finding that the women in the program who have the assistance from the students, have more contact with the schools, better access to communication channels, and a better understanding of how the school system works.

### **Case Studies**

In the field of education, it is common to find research that refers to case studies. However, research utilizing case studies usually overlaps with other methods of data collection used in qualitative research, such as ethnography, participant observation, naturalistic inquiry, grounded theory, or exploratory research (Merriam, 1998). This possibility for overlapping among methods makes difficult to identify why this kind of research is called case study. For that reason, Merriam (1998) delineates specific characteristics that are necessary to define a case study. As she explains:

[T]he defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case [meaning that a case study is] a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. (p. 27)

Therefore, if a phenomenon cannot be bounded by specific limits then, it is not a case study (Merriam, 1998). In this study the service-learning program serves as a point of comparison because of its limited number of participants. Merriam (1998) explains:

“One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be, that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite amount of time for observations” (p. 28).

In this research, the number of participants that were involved in CTB draws a limit to the number of people that I could possibly interview. To further define the scope of the analysis, I selected Helena, who actively participated in the service-learning class as long as the program

was available. I also selected another woman, Sandra who participated in the program only for a number of years, and a third couple, Jose Luis and Mercedes, who did not participate in CTB at any time. Helena's experience was mainly related to the context of the CTB program; Sandra's experience was a transition between being part of the program and getting involved in other types of groups and activities in the community. On other hand, Jose Luis and Mercedes did not attend any program at any point and did not have students placed in their home at any time.

### **Particularistic Approach**

Merriam (1998) outlines three approaches that can be used to delimitate a case study: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. I decided to take a particularistic approach, which means that the case study focuses “on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 29). I use a particularistic approach to compare the specific experiences of the mothers involved in a service-learning program as compared to another immigrant Mexican mother in the community, Mercedes, who did not attend the class. Mercedes' husband, Jose Luis, was included in the study for reasons I explain in the following chapter. As Shaw (1978) points out, a particularistic approach “concentrate[s] attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation. In this dissertation I document the experience of three different mothers and a father and how they confront the specific problem of making sense of the school system. As Merriam (1998) points out these case studies serve to portrait the particular experiences of these parents. “They are problem centered, small scale, entrepreneurial endeavors.” (Shaw, 1978, p. 2, as in Merriam 1998, p. 29).

### **The Settings**

Although Latinos have a minor presence in the area, rural Virginia has experienced a rapid growth of new Latino comers in the last two decades (Parrado & Kandel, 2008). As

Winders (2005) points out, it is undeniable that “the historically mapped areas of out-migration in the south have become areas of in-migration, particularly for foreign born Hispanics” (p. 683). The Latino influence in the area is easy to detect by observing the diverse new patterns in local businesses. In the seven years I have lived in the area, I have witnessed a major expansion of the Mexican food industry. Mexican restaurants have opened in the small towns of Floyd and Pembroke. Some other Mexican-owned stores have opened in the last five years. The most impressive change is the number of Mexican immigrants who work in the kitchens of the larger food chains, the Mexican restaurants, and the Chinese kitchens.

Most of the families that participated in the CTB program lived in Roanoke City. However, Helena lives in one of the communities that is considered part of the New River Valley (NRV) and Sandra lives in one of the adjacent communities outside north of the city of Roanoke. The Hernandezes live in one of the communities in the NRV as well. Although the participants in this study are not representative of all the immigrant population that has arrived to Southwest Virginia in recent years, their experiences help to understand what kind of communication channels with the schools are available to immigrant parents.

**The New River Valley.** In the NRV, the Latino immigration can be linked to the presence of a major state university that generates various levels of employment and to the growing service sector as well. The growth in student population has created jobs in the service industry, which have also attracted Latinos to the area. Although Latinos are now a total of 2% of the local population, the cultural impact of the increased numbers is significant. The New River Valley comprises the counties of Montgomery, Floyd, Pulaski, and Giles counties (Tilley-Lubbs, 2003). The following table shows the demographic profile of the growing Hispanic

population in the Giles and Montgomery counties in the NRV, where Helena and the Hernandezes live.

Table 3

*Giles and Montgomery County Demographic Profile (Pew Hispanic, n/d)*

<b>Giles County</b>			
	1990	2000	2007
Hispanic Population	57	105	154
Total County Population	16,366	16,657	17,228
Hispanics as Percent of County Population		1%	1%
		<b>Change from 1990</b>	<b>Change from 2000</b>
Percent Change in Hispanic Population		84%	47%
<b>Montgomery County</b>			
	1990	2000	2007
Hispanic Population	793	1,321	1,853
Total County Population	73,913	83,681	89,193
Hispanics as Percent of County Population		2%	2%
		<b>Change from 1990</b>	<b>Change from 2000</b>
Percentage Change in Hispanic Population		67%	40%

**Roanoke.** The Roanoke Valley metropolitan area is comprised of Roanoke City, Roanoke County, Salem, Botetourt County, Craig County, Bedford, Bedford County, Floyd County and Franklin County, with more or less 360,000 inhabitants overall (Tilley-Lubbs, 2003). The city of Roanoke itself has a population of one hundred thousand people. According to the 2000 Census in Roanoke City, 65% of the population is considered White and 25% African American. There is not a classification for Hispanic or Latino, the classification named as “Other” is 3%. The following table shows the demographic profile of the growing Hispanic population in Botetourt County where Sandra lives.

Table 4

*Botetourt County Demographic Profile (Pew Hispanic, n/d)*

<b>Botetourt County</b>			
	1990	2000	2007
Hispanic Population	143	181	391
Total County Population	24,992	30,496	32,261
Hispanics as Percent of			
County Population		1%	1%
		<b>Change from 1990</b>	<b>Change from 2000</b>
Percent Change in Hispanic Population		27%	116%

**Entry into the Field**

**The service-learning program.** As the graduate assistant for the service-learning class “Crossing the Border,” I gained entry into the personal lives of the group of women participating

in the class and first-hand knowledge of the context of their lives. I worked with the program for three years and I was a participant in the class before that. I regularly attended monthly meetings in Roanoke, building a relationship with the majority of the women. I served as a translator, curriculum planner, and research assistant in the various research projects related to the class. On a personal level, I have been invited to several important social events such as birthdays, first communions, and baptisms held by these families.

**The Catholic Church.** A second way of entering the community was attending a mass conducted in Spanish, in a nearby Catholic Church. Some of the women in the program regularly attend this mass in Spanish. I attend the mass in Spanish, attended as well by people that work in the restaurant sector and Latino students in the university. Some of the women participating in the program have husbands or relatives who work for the local restaurants. Through my regular visits to Mexican restaurants in the area, I have gained the trust of the waitresses and kitchen personnel who know my association with the program participants. I have been an active member in the student Latino community, as well. I have met many people associated with the Mexican community from the CTB program, their families, and other friends and relatives and people I met at the Catholic Church. I gained entry into the participants' households through my existing relationships with participants in the service-learning program and my relationship with other students that frequently attend the mass offered in Spanish.

### **The Participants**

**Helena.** From the women in the program I selected Helena, since she was one of the first and long-term participants in the program. Helena has lived in the United States for more than 10 years and has been an active participant in the program since its first year of operation, in the

Fall semester of 2003. Helena's children were born in the United States and all their schooling experiences have been in this country.

**Sandra.** Similarly to Helena, Sandra was one of the first participants in the CTB program. Despite being very active and welcomed in the CTB program Sandra decided to drop out. She also became more and more active in her church and she moved north the city of Roanoke. She decided that attending the monthly meetings and fulfilling her commitment with the church were too many responsibilities for her. She maintains an active role in her church community. Sandra has five children, four of whom were born in the United States.

**Jose Luis and Mercedes.** I met Jose Luis and Mercedes by attending one of the masses at the Catholic Church. They have lived in the United States for ten years and have five children, two of them being born in the United States. All children attend school, they range from Elementary, to Middle school and High school. Mercedes and Jose Luis did not participate in the CTB program at any time.

### **Insider-Outsider Perspective**

It is important to explain what I call "the insider-outsider" perspective. Although I am Mexican, my native language is Spanish, and I was born and reared in Mexico, my life experiences as an international student differ greatly from those of the parents who immigrated for economic reasons. I am aware that my socioeconomic status and my educational background make me somewhat of an outsider for the women that I interviewed. I acknowledge the imaginary borders that separate me from the challenging daily realities of their lives (Behar, 1996).

### **Data Collection**

In line with the purpose of the study, the main sources of data were semi-structured interviews with the participants in the study and observations during my time in their households. I follow Merriam's (1998) recommendation for purposeful sampling since "[p]urposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). I purposely chose Helena because of her participation in the CTB program, and her experiences with the students. Also, I purposely choose Sandra because of her experiences in the service-learning program as well as her departure from it. Finally, I purposely search to interview a mother who did not have any relationship with the students in the program or the service-learning program. When I met Mercedes and Jose Luis at church, I asked Mercedes to participate in the research. The first time I went to their home, Jose Luis was in the house because he was injured from work. He wanted to participate as well and Jose Luis accepted to be interviewed. I spent at least 20 hours with each family during the Fall semester of 2009.

### **The Interviews**

When people engage in the interview process; they make meaning of their lives by telling their story. "Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process" (Seidman, 1998, p. 1). During the interview process, people select details of their lives to highlight, constructing meaning for their own experience, by ordering and reflecting on these. For that reason, the purpose of interviewing is not just to get concrete answers to questions or to formulate a hypothesis, but to come to understand the experiences of other people, based on the meaning they choose to make of their own experiences (Seidman, 1998). I decided to conduct semi-

structured interviews, in order to understand the personal meanings of the experiences of making sense of the school system for each of the participants.

### **The Interview Process**

In order to develop or to expand personal rapport, I visited or talked to the families about the project previously to the beginning of the interview process. I asked permission and followed the protocol to gain informed consent from all the participants in the study. I read the informed consent (Appendix B) to all participants in the project. The informed consent was written in Spanish for a clear understanding by the participants. I translated the form into English to comply with the Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements. I explained to all the participants the interview process as clearly as possible and ask them several times if they had any questions about the interview process.

For the interviews, I tried to follow as accurately as possible Seidman's (1998) recommendation by conducting a series of three semi-structured interviews (Appendix C). I interviewed Helena and Sandra three times. The first time I went to Mercedes' house, Jose Luis was there and he wanted to participate in the project. After our first meeting I interviewed Mercedes a second time, but Jose Luis was not present at that time due to his work schedule. During the third interview, Jose Luis was there and he also responded to the questions.

I used open ended questions to guide the interviews. The use of open ended questions provides the opportunity to build on previous answers rather than having a single questionnaire. I tried to keep the interview questions in an orderly fashion to preserve the focus of the research (Seidman, 1998). To maintain accuracy, I taped recorded the interviews with all the participants and transcribed them myself verbatim.

## **Other Sources of Data**

**Observation.** Observations are a way to acquire depth and understanding of the complexities of a social process or phenomena (Mason, 2002). Therefore I complemented the interviews with observations while I visited the homes of the research participants. Mason (2002) points out that entering a setting or a situation to be observed is a process in which the observer is involved, not only in observing, but also in “participating, interrogating, listening, and communicating, as well as a range of other forms of being, doing and thinking” (p. 87). The specific purpose of documenting observations is to document thoroughly the multiple dimensions of the participant’s life. During the data collection process, I complemented the interviews with my personal observations. I attended family gatherings and birthday parties, visited the families during the interview process, and attended a parent-teacher conference with Jose Luis and Mercedes. Observations are of significant importance since the interaction with the participants provide with context clues that help support the data analysis, guide the research, and give insight for future research in order to record the observations (Quandt & Arcury, 1997). I kept track of them in my field notes.

**Field notes.** I took notes and kept track of all the visits in my personal diary. I kept field notes and a journal to record all my interactions with the participants and all the data that might be relevant for the research. I wrote on my journal the events within 24 hours in order to record as accurately as possible the experience and the events. To make sense of the information, filter and select data relevant to further analysis, I wrote down the field notes in a systematic and orderly fashion as possible (Emerson, 1995).

### **Limitations**

One of the main limitations of this project was that the interviews have being conducted in Spanish. A significant amount of translation was required to accurately present the data from the interviews. Translation becomes a difficult task because some of the original meaning conveyed by the speaker may be lost in the translation process.

Most of the participants in this study are busy women with children of various ages. It was difficult at times to schedule interviews and activities ahead of time that could match the families' schedule and my own very busy school schedule and personal activities. For instance, when I went to Mercedes and Jose Luis house I did not anticipate him becoming a participant. However, he was glad to be part of the study. The next time I visited their household, Jose Luis was out working and Mercedes was waiting for me for our scheduled conversation. I understand that sometimes we cannot control participants' busy lives. On other hand, I went to the school with Mercedes and Jose Luis for a parent-teacher conference. When I asked them to be at the parent-teacher conference they agreed and told me that someone else would be interpreting for them. However, when we arrived at the school, Mercedes and Jose Luis and the school teachers requested me to serve as interpreter for them. I changed from being an observer to being a participant-observer in the interaction between Mercedes and Jose Luis with the schools.

### **Ethical Issues**

It is the obligation of the researcher to conduct ethical research and protect the participants. In order to keep anonymity, I asked each participating to choose a pseudonym to protect her identity. In the process of the interviews and the writing of the final project I present the data in such a way that distinguishable context is not be easily recognized. However, I am aware that, as Merriam (1998) points out, "At the local level, it is nearly impossible to protect the

identity of either the case or the people involved” (p. 217). Other service-learning participants may be able to recognize the participants by the data I included. For this reason, I omit some personal information that could identify the individual participants. I want to avoid as much as possible any possibility of endangerment or humiliation, although in no way could the omissions interfere with the specific research questions I explore in this study.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of making meaning can be one of the most difficult ones that the researcher has to face, since it is during this process that she goes back and forth from concrete events to a higher level of abstraction in the course of constructing theory (Mason, 2002, Merriam, 1998, Yin, 2003). Merriam (1998) points out three different stages of data analysis in the process of making meaning: consolidating, reducing, and interpreting the data.

#### **Consolidating the Data**

The first step in organizing material is to bring all the data together in order to organize it in a retrievable manner. The data need to be sorted and ordered, so the researcher can make interpretative sense of it (Mason, 2002). Merriam (1998) points out two stages in the analysis of data. The first stage takes place during the data collection, when the researcher follows hunches or hypotheses that become findings at the end of the process. The second stage is a more intensive process of analysis after the data collection (Merriam, 1998).

One way to proceed with the analysis during data collection is to write analytical memos after each round of interviews to capture themes, hunches or ideas that emerge in the first set of data. Then, in order to keep to the scope of the research and after each round of interviews, the data has to be analyzed and compared with the research questions. This way, “[y]ou are

organizing and refining rather than beginning data analysis [at the very end of the data collection]” (Merriam, 1998, p. 162).

To facilitate the retrieval process, the researcher should assign codes to the information. Those codes can be simple identification tags for each participant, or a way to identify repetitive incidents, events, or quotes that illustrate a theme. Coding helps to retrieve, organize, and manipulate the data. It is important to mention that organizing the material is not analytically neutral. Mason (2002) points out “[In] choosing or devising a particular system, you are at the very least making certain assumptions about the kinds of phenomena you are cataloguing and the kinds you are not [...] as well as how and in what form you will be able to retrieve them later on” (p. 148).

### **Interpreting the Data**

Further along in the analytical process is the construction of categories. For a second level of analysis, Merriam (1998) suggests moving from description to abstraction, using concepts that would describe the phenomena. Here the data have to be classified into schemas that consist of themes or categories. Categories are constructed based on pieces of information or *units of data*. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981) a unit of data is the smallest piece of information that can stand by itself but inform the general picture of the study. In order to build a category there should be regular patterns or recurring regularities that are content in those units of data.

The higher level of abstraction in data interpretation is to move from the process of systematic classification that is the building of categories and themes, to the analytical process of making inferences, developing models, or generating theory. As Merriam (1998) points out:

When categories and their properties are reduced and refined and then linked together by tentative hypothesis, the analysis is moving toward the development of a theory to explain the data meaning. This third level of analysis transcends the formation of categories, for a theory seeks to explain a large number of phenomena and tell how they are related. (p. 192)

### **Data Analysis in Case Studies**

In this study, I followed Merriam's (1998) recommendations for analyzing case study data. Because of the amount of information that is to be used to illustrate each case in a case studies research, it is important to pay attention to the way data are analyzed (Merriam 1998). In a first stage the information was separated case by case. Later in the process, I analyzed the information in a cross-case analysis. "In a multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis – the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194).

In the *within-case* analysis the researcher needs to understand the many variables that can play a significant role in each case (Yin, 1994). For each case I analyzed the data separately. I consolidated, reduced, and interpreted the data case by case. After analyzing the cases individually I did a cross-case analysis that will be described further in this dissertation. In the same way I presented finding for each research question, across all case studies. Differences across cases were described in depth in the analysis by individual case. With the cross-case analysis I tried to build a general explanation that can describe and integrate each of the cases, (Yin, 1994). Ultimately, I built an explanation and a framework across all the three cases (Merriam, 1998).

## Confirmation of Data

Conducting a qualitative research implies that the researcher takes the main responsibility for collecting; interpreting, and reporting the data. Thus validity is of a major concern. A way to confirm the data is for the researcher to present a report of the findings within the context of the research. “In this type of research is important to understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, 1998, p. 208).

Merriam proposes six ways to confirm the data: triangulation, member checking, long-term observations, peer examination, participatory research, and clarification of researcher’s biases. For this study I plan to use three main forms of confirmation of data:

**Member check.** My intention is to hear the stories of the participants and contextualize them into social situations rather than pretending to be windows into their minds (Seidman, 1998). I am aware that we “tell ourselves in different ways to different people, in accordance with who we think they are, and how they want them to see us” (Mathews, 2000, p. 29). As Mathews (2000) points out, people are not chameleons; to a large degree, they are who they say they are and “to argue different would be to insult them” (p. 29). In order to confirm the data, after transcribing the interviews, I went back to talk to the participants, and asked if I misinterpreted their words (Seidman, 1998).

**Peer examination.** Because of the experience and long term work with the women in the Crossing the Border group, I shared with Dr. Tilley-Lubbs my findings as they emerge.

**Researcher’s biases.** As I mentioned, I am aware of the unique nature of my understanding of the experience of living in the United States, besides the differences in class

between me and the participants in the research. For the purpose of the study, I intend to constantly reflect on my own assumptions and perspectives to be aware of possible assumptions I may have.

### **Summary of Methodology**

In this chapter I presented a description of the methodology that I followed in order to accomplish the purpose of the overarching goal and the research questions discussed in chapter one. The chapter outlined the need to use a qualitative strategy to perform a case study research with three mothers and a father living in Southwest Virginia. Two participants were purposefully selected from the participants in the service-learning class “Crossing the Border.” The first one, Helena, participated in the program as long as it was up and running; the second one, Sandra, was an active participant for a couple of years before she decided to stop attending the program. Finally, Mercedes and Jose Luis, are a couple that did not participate in the program at any time. In this chapter I also described the setting where the study took place and the data collection procedures as well as the analysis that I conducted after collecting the data. The results from the study will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four: Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to understand what kind of parental involvement strategies Mexican monolingual parents develop in order to support their children at school. This research is situated in the Roanoke and New River Valleys, located in the mountains of southwest Virginia. The study examines the experiences of three Mexican immigrant mothers and one father. The first one, Helena, was an active participant of a service-learning program hosted by a medium-sized land grant university. The second one, Sandra, attended the program only for some time. A third mother, Mercedes was randomly selected from the community; she did not participate in the service-learning program at any time. Finally, Jose Luis, Mercedes' husband, also participated in the interviews when I first met Mercedes. The study relied mainly upon semi-structured interviews with the participants in the research, along with observations and field notes. During the data collection, I spent approximately 20 hours with each family from September to December of 2009. Besides the time I spent in the home interviewing, I attended social and school-related events with the families. This chapter reports the findings from the interviews I conducted with the families as well as my observations while in each house, at social events, and at social services offices. Isn't all this info repeated from chapter 3?

This chapter is organized into three main sections. First, I introduce the research participants. Second, I analyze the findings organized by research question and participant, presenting a cross-case analysis for each question based on the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge. Third, I present a summary of findings. Implications of these finding are discussed further in the following chapter.

The following research questions inform the findings of the research:

1. What communication channels are available between Mexican parents and their children's schools?
2. How do immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parents interaction in the United States?
3. How do Mexican immigrant parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?

### **Introduction to the Participants in this Research**

The three participants in the research were Helena, Sandra, and Mercedes, and their families. I include Mercedes' husband Jose Luis because after meeting with them in our first interview session, I learned that Mercedes cannot read nor write. Consequently, Jose Luis serves as the main contact with the schools. I provide some details regarding how I met the participants, my relationships with them, their socioeconomic statuses in Mexico, and their levels of education. The names of all participants are pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

### **Helena**

#### **Meeting Helena**

I have known Helena for almost seven years. I had a long relationship with the service-learning program and Helena was a long-time participant. I served as a volunteer, a student in the class, a graduate assistant, and a participant observer while conducting research for my master's thesis. I met Helena during my first year in the program in 2003. During that first year Michelle, another graduate student and I were placed with Juanita, Helena's sister who lived next door. At that time, I did not have a car to commute to Roanoke, where most of the other service-learning

placements were located. Fortunately Michelle was willing to drive me to the Juanita's house, located in the same town as the university, in order to visit Juanita and sometimes also Helena.

Helena and Juanita lived almost at the outskirts of town where there were only three one-bedroom, one-bath houses with tiny, narrow kitchens. When I first met Helena and her husband, Ezequiel, they lived in the other duplex where Juanita lived, with their two children, Esmeralda, who was three at the time, and little Pedro who was a twelve-month old baby. Because of my relationship with Juanita and Helena, they invited me to Juanita's son's baptism and to birthday parties for the children.

### **Reconnecting with Helena**

Approximately three years later, Helena and her family moved about 20 miles from the college town where we both lived and first met each other. Helena and Ezequiel decided that the rent for their tiny home was too expensive, so they moved farther west to a smaller town where they could live more cheaply. After Helena moved, I had fewer opportunities to visit with her because of the distance, but I was able to continue a closer relationship with her sister Juanita since she continued to live in town. However, I did see Helena at the monthly meetings held for the family literacy program that accompanied the service-learning course through which we first met.

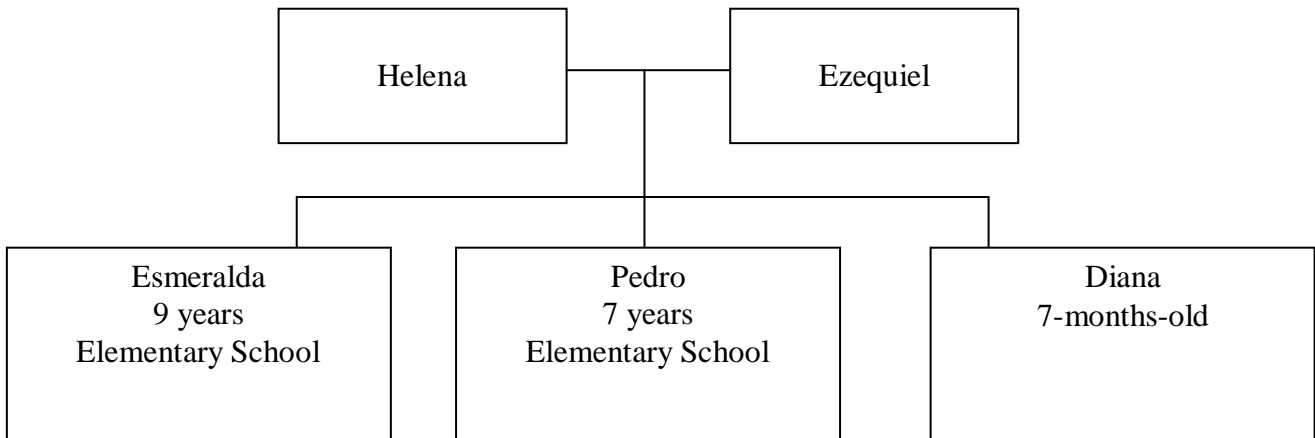
The last time I visited Helena, prior to beginning this research, was during the summer of 2007. Although I was not an active member of the service-learning program at that time, I attended some of the family literacy meetings to keep in touch with the participants. Time passed, and by the time I reconnected with Helena, she had given birth to her third child, baby Diana, seven months old at the time of this research.

When I called Helena to schedule my first visit she was excited and welcomed me to her home. Helena is a dynamic, energetic, and self-confident person. She is always looking for new things to do, so she was interested in participating in my current research.

She and Ezequiel are from a small village in rural Jalisco, one of the states in Mexico with the highest percentage of immigrants in the United States. Helena and Ezequiel came to the United States twelve years ago. They have decided to raise their family in the United States and bought the house they had rented for the past five years. Currently, Helena is a stay-at-home mother and Ezequiel earns a living by doing yard work year-round.

Table 5

*Helena’s Family (Ages at the beginning of the study)*



**Socioeconomics**

Like many immigrant families, Helena finds her life in the United States better in terms of economic opportunities than in Mexico. Helena’s father was a construction worker, which in Mexico is traditionally a low-income occupation without any social security benefits. He retired because of health issues. Helena constantly reminded me that “*éramos bien pobres, Marce*” [we

were very poor, Marce]. To help support her family through the years, Helena's mother has sold items like shoes or clothing. Her mother's small business and the money their sons and daughters living in the United States send to them help support Helena's parents and her youngest sisters who still live with them back in Mexico. Helena's mother did not know how to read and write until she started attending an adult literacy program fairly recently.

### **Educational Level**

Helena finished the equivalent of middle school in a *telesecundaria*, which is a non-traditional system in Mexico. *Telesecundarias* are equivalent to middle school in the United States. They are located mainly in rural settings where there is less infrastructure and fewer teachers are available for classroom instruction. Students learn by watching recorded lessons on television, with a teacher who only serves as a facilitator. Helena finished the equivalent of middle school and regrets that she could not continue in school. To attend high school Helena would have had to move to the closest city and her parents did not have the income to support any of their children living away from them. Helena and her sisters entered the work force after graduating from the *telesecundaria*, to help support the family. Still, Helena asserts that she loves learning, particularly concepts related to technology. She says, "*Me encanta aprender.*" [I love learning new things].

## **Sandra**

### **Meeting Sandra**

I first met Sandra in the fall semester of 2004. I immediately identified with her since we are both from Mexico City. Sandra is a tall woman, with caramel-colored skin, and she wears her hair in long layers. Sandra is in her late 30s, a few years older than I, but I always felt a much greater difference in our ages. . Sandra is a strong and assertive woman. When I met her she was

a regular participant in the service-learning program. She rarely missed a meeting, had great rapport with the students, and openly voiced her opinions on issues that mattered to her. I invited Sandra to participate in my master's thesis project, where she was one of three participants.

After I completed my thesis, Sandra kept participating in the service-learning program for a couple of semesters. Afterwards, she got more and more involved in her church, taking a leading role in the congregation. The last semester she participated in the service-learning program, Sandra was already fully committed to her church and had moved farther north from the city. Time conflicts and commuting to the monthly meetings made it impossible for Sandra to stay in the program. When she realized that asking students to commute almost fifty miles each way to her house was overwhelming, she decided to leave the service-learning program.

### **Reconnecting with Sandra**

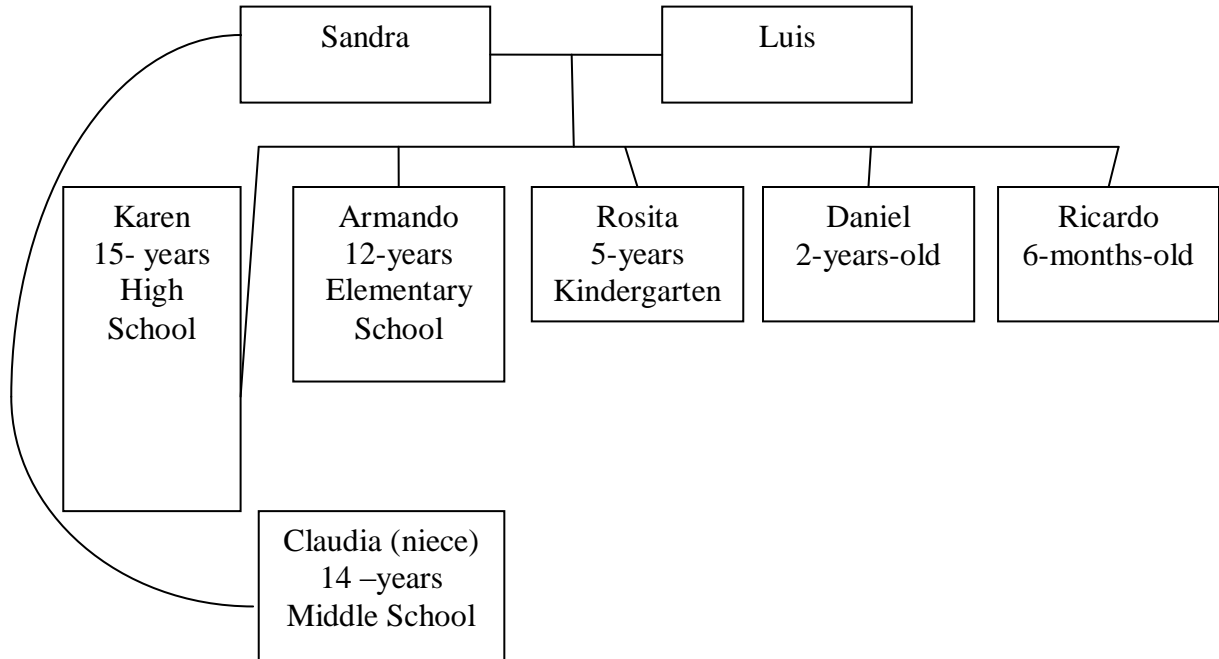
After finishing my thesis project, I did not see her or visit her as frequently as I once did, besides her moving farther from the city. Additionally her phone number changed during this time and I had to get my research advisor to provide me with her new phone number. Sandra was glad to hear from me, since it had been a while since the last time we talked. I asked her if I could visit and she immediately agreed. It took me a while to find Sandra's new place. The driving directions I got from the Internet had me driving almost exclusively on narrow, twisting, backroads. I drove for a long time, then made a wrong turn and ended up driving longer than I expected. I am not an experienced driver off the highway, which reminds me that I am from an urban setting and a foreigner to this semi-rural region of Virginia.

By the time I reconnected with Sandra, her family had grown significantly. When I first met her she had two children, Karen and Armando. Now Sandra has five children of her own:

Karen (16), Armando (12), Rosita (5), Daniel (2), and Ricardo (6 months old). Additionally, she is the legal guardian of her sister’s daughter Claudia (14) who came to live with her in the fall.

Table 6

*Sandra’s Family (Ages at the beginning of the study):*



**Socioeconomics.**

Sandra is originally from Mexico City, from a traditionally working-class neighborhood in the city. Sandra is the second of three sisters. Her alcoholic father left the family, leaving her mother with the responsibility of providing for her three daughters. Sandra’s mother worked two shifts cleaning at a fast food restaurant, the equivalent of McDonald’s, back in Mexico. When she was 15 years old, Sandra moved with her mother and sisters to Ciudad Juarez, a border city between Mexico and the United States.

## **Educational Level**

Right before the move, Sandra finished the equivalent to ninth grade, or middle school in Mexico, but when she arrived in Ciudad Juarez, Sandra dropped out of school. Sandra proudly notes that she was a straight A student. She finished elementary school with a 9.8 average, the equivalent of a 3.9 GPA. By age 16, Sandra had entered the work force, serving as an assistant at a shoe store, although she did not have any formal training. Sandra was very successful and was named supervisor at the shoe store; however, her mother did not let her go to Monterrey, another northern city, to receive the required training for the job. After leaving that position, Sandra worked in a *maquiladora*<sup>7</sup> for five years entering data from coupons. Afterwards she worked as an office assistant at a paint store. According to Sandra, she did not have the training, but she knew how to use a computer because of her previous job. She advanced quickly in that position as well, and became the store manager. She met her husband, Luis, at the paint store where they both worked. After they immigrated to the United States, Sandra became a stay-at-home mother, while Luis worked in one of the dairy farms in the area for some years. Currently, Luis works in construction with a small contractor.

## **Mercedes and Jose Luis**

### **Meeting Mercedes and Jose Luis**

Because she knew I wanted to interview another woman, Helena suggested that I contact a couple of her Mexican friends in the community. However, they did not have children in elementary school, which was one of the criteria I used to recruit a third participant. Helena also

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<sup>7</sup> Maquiladoras are multinational owned assembly plants in Mexico. According to Garza Toledo (2007) in Mexico the legal regime of *maquila* grant the company the right to “import temporarily the inputs, machinery, and equipment necessary for assembly, transformation, or repair of export products, without paying import or value-added taxes or compensatory fees; in addition, the company shall enjoy exemption from export taxes by the Mexican government and by the U. S. government (...) In terms of taxes, the maquilas only pay income taxes, and the exports are exempt from payment of added-value taxes (IVA)” (p. 399).

suggested the wife of the owner of one of the Mexican restaurants in the area, but she did not match the low-income socioeconomic background I was looking for. Helena then suggested that I go to church with her so I attended mass on a Sunday afternoon. I went to the only Spanish-speaking service they have in the area.

When the mass finished, I chatted with some people I knew, and then Helena came and said: *Vamos a preguntarles, Marce*, [Let's go ask them, Marce]. I approached them to introduce myself, and Helena introduced herself, mentioning that they see each other every weekend in church, but until that moment they had not spoken with each other nor introduced themselves. Mercedes and Jose Luis were standing in the hall of the church when we met. They both looked to be in their early forties. Mercedes is a medium-sized woman with light brown skin and long hair braided down her back. Jose Luis was standing next to her, holding her arm. Jose Luis has light skin and dark black hair, with a dark mustache. I told them I was looking for participants to understand how Mexican parents, who do not speak English, interact with their children's schools in the United States. Mercedes immediately told me that they get help from their older daughters. I tried to explain to them that I needed to actually visit with and interview them. Mercedes and Jose Luis just stared at me. Helena then said that my project was actually very interesting. "*Está interesante su proyecto*" [Her project is very interesting]. I asked them for their phone number so I could contact them during the week. Mercedes gave me a piece of paper with their phone number and address. She mentioned that they had it written down since they were running errands. At that point I did not know she did not know how to read nor write and that they needed the paper with the address to fill in applications for service providers. I took the piece of paper and treated it as gold in my pocket. I called Mercedes a couple of days later and

scheduled a meeting with her for the following Friday. I asked her if I could talk to her about the project. She accepted and I went to her house.

Mercedes and Jose Luis live the closest to me, although they live in a part of town where I had never been before. They live in a single-family home that sits at the foot of a hill. I parked next to their house, and knocked on the door. Mercedes opened the door and Jose Luis stood directly behind her. They were both waiting for me to have some leftover tamales and coffee for breakfast. Mercedes' tamales were delicious, and as we chatted, I explained the project. They agreed to participate, so I gave each of them a copy of my IRB form. To my surprise, Mercedes immediately told me that I should hand hers to Jose Luis since she cannot read and write. I proceeded to read the full IRB form to both of them and explain the process of the research. They both agreed and Mercedes printed her name on the form with difficulty. Jose Luis asked me to start the interview right away. I took my recorder out and began.

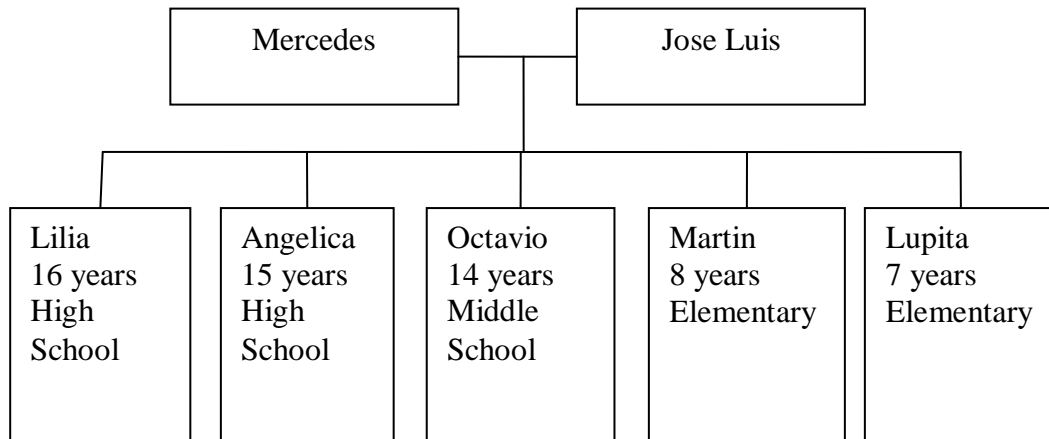
### **Socioeconomics**

Mercedes and Jose Luis are from a low socioeconomic background. Jose Luis used to work loading and unloading trucks at the central main market in the city of Leon, Guanajuato, not earning enough to support his family. Before moving to the United States, they lived in Jose Luis' parents' house. Being the parent of three children and working a minimum wage job, Jose Luis did not have many options but to cross the border to look for new opportunities. Jose Luis and Mercedes both have relatives in the United States who immigrated before and after they did. During his first trip, Jose Luis stayed in the United States alone for almost 2 years. When he decided to return to Mexico, he did not want to live in the United States without his family. He asked Mercedes to cross the border with him and their three children. Now they have been living in the United States for almost ten years. They have five children, Lilia (16), Angelica (15), and

Octavio (14), all born in Mexico, and Martin (8) and Lupita (7), both of whom were born in the United States.

Table 7

*The Hernandezes' Family (Ages at the beginning of the study):*



### **Educational Level**

Mercedes self-defines as illiterate, although she finished the equivalent of third grade. She says she can recognize letters but cannot put them together to read. Mercedes can write her name with some difficulty. Jose Luis finished the equivalent of elementary school, but he mentioned having problems with school after the sixth grade. Jose Luis' family registered him in middle school, but after failing the equivalent of seventh grade he dropped out. Jose Luis recalls:

*En ese tiempo yo fui flojo porque pues ya lo sabía lo que, lo que me iban a enseñar los maestros, y ya no estudiaba y simplemente me quedé con eso, a la hora de, este ya pasar a la secundaria fue difícil para mí, yo, batallé en secundaria para seguir adelante, porque quizá no estaba acostumbrado o el aprendizaje se me había pasado, no sé.*

At that time I was lazy because I knew already what they were going to teach me. I did not study; I just stayed with what I knew. When I went to middle school it was difficult for me. I had problems with keeping going, maybe because I was not used to studying, or my learning abilities were gone, I don't know.

Currently Jose Luis works in road construction. Mercedes is the only one of the mothers I interviewed who has a job. She works in the kitchen of one of the fast food chains in the area. She used to work full-time, but during the research period Mercedes had changed her schedule to work during the weekends. Mercedes commuted with a friend-employee in the same restaurant during the week, after they move the commute was longer and she did not want to ask her friend to pick her up in the mornings. She changed her schedule to weekends because then Jose Luis could take her to work.

### **Summary of the Introduction to Participants**

To summarize, the mothers in this research each live in the United States with their families: a husband and children. All of them have lived in this country for more than ten years. Helena is the only one whose children were all born in the United States. Sandra and Mercedes have so-called international families (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994), meaning that their older children were born in Mexico and the younger ones were born in the United States. All of the families are of low socioeconomic status in Mexico and in the United States. All of the parents self assess as having limited English proficiency. Their levels of education varied from illiterate to the equivalent of middle school in Mexico.

### **Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

In this section I present the findings of the research. The findings are organized into three main themes that correlate with the research questions previously presented: 1) communication channels available between Mexican parents and the schools; 2) parent's knowledge about standard cultural practices of school-parent interaction in the United States, and 3) parent's description of their experiences of getting involved with their children's school. Each section contains a description of the research question, the findings for each participant related to the question, and finally, a cross case analysis and interpretation of the findings based on the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge.

#### **Communication Channels**

*Q1: What communication channels are available between Mexican parents and their children's schools?*

The first research question focuses on understanding what kinds of communication channels Mexican immigrant parents use to reach their children's schools. Immigrant parents face the reality of making sense of a world in a language unknown to them. In the literature, several researchers stated that teachers believe immigrant parents are hard to reach, inattentive, and uninvolved (Crozier & Davies, 2005; Lawson, 2001). An underlying assumption is that minority parents do not have the social and intellectual capital to engage in their children's education (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). Therefore, designing and conducting effective forms of communication is crucial for parents to understand school programs and their children's educational progress (Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

I used the notion of funds of knowledge in order to describe how parents survive in a language unknown to them. Parents use a number of resources or *funds of knowledge* (Moll, et

al., 1992) to maintain the household's welfare. *Funds of knowledge* refers to those "skills, abilities, ideas, or practices or bodies of knowledge" that are "historically developed in a community" in order to "preserve the household's functioning and well-being" (Moll, et al., 2005, p. 72). In this section, I describe two main strategies parents developed using their funds of knowledge to communicate and maintain contact with the school. The first strategy refers to the use of interpreters, while the second strategy is the parents' own knowledge of the English language.

### **Using Interpreters**

The first strategy parents develop is the use of interpreters to communicate with the school. Parents describe the need for interpreters not only to communicate with the schools, but also to accomplish several tasks that involve communicating in the English language. For instance, they need help clarifying billing information, making appointments, communicating with doctors or healthcare providers, establishing contact with prospective employers, filling out different kinds of applications, and many other everyday activities (Valdés, 2003; Worthy, 2006). Parents describe calling upon interpreters for assistance in the following scenarios when communicating with school administrators: a) to register children at school; b) to communicate with teachers during parent-teacher conferences; c) to translate school correspondence such as permission slips and notices; and d) to mediate between themselves and the school. Interpreters become a critical element for communication and a vital means to understanding the school system (Valdés, 2003)

I frame the phenomenon of using interpreters through an ecological perspective, where interpreters become the *affordance networks* to communicate and to understand the school system in the United States. "An affordance network is the collection of facts, concepts, tools,

methods, practices, agendas, commitments, and even people, taken with respect to an individual, that are distributed across time and space and are viewed as necessary for the satisfaction of particular goal sets” (Barab & Roth, 2006, p. 5). Parents engage in *affordance networks* in order to achieve their goal of communicating and maintaining their connection with the schools.

Researchers have previously discussed that parents rely on a family network, particularly children, to deal with the everyday tasks of survival and communication (Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Valdés, 2003). Valdés (2003) emphasizes the set of abilities and skills that children develop when they serve as interpreters for their parents. Other researchers have argued that the fact that children function as interpreters for their families reverses the roles of parents and children (Chu, 1999; Sung, 1987). Based on this research, I question the assumption that children are the only interpretive resource for immigrant parents. Furthermore, I argue that a child’s interpreter role does not result in an inverted parent-children role, nor does it challenge parents authority in the decision making process for the household. My research also suggests that children are not their parents’ first preference for certain interpreting tasks. In all three cases, the parents prefer other adults with more competence in the particular problem that needs to be solved to serve as their interpreters. When the parents cannot access other resources, then they ask for help from their children. I will discuss how parents choose different people from their affordance network based on the availability and proficiency of the interpreters, and the level of trust with them.

### **Case by Case Description of Interpreters**

#### **Helena**

Helena, like many other immigrant parents, has to look for resources to contact and develop a relationship with her children’s schools. When immigrants cross the border they arrive

in the United States with limited to no knowledge of English, as was the case for Helena. Consequently, Helena has built an affordance network to make contact and maintain communication with the schools. Typically, friends and family members are the first resource parents utilize to reach out to the school (Valdés, 2003). For instance, when she first registered her daughter in a Head Start program in the area, Helena's husband Ezequiel found a friend from Puerto Rico to help them with the registration process. Once at the school they received help from school staff who provided them with an interpreter. Nonetheless, the initial contact resulted from Helena's husband locating an interpreter to begin the process.

The process of communicating with the schools is not a singular event. Helena described the significant amount of information that she receives weekly from her children's schools. "*Un altero de papeles, cada semana*" [A stack of papers, every week]. Communicating with the schools starts with understanding all the information that parents receive at home. Helena has to look for ways of making sense of the information she receives. One resource for Helena is her husband's nephew Pancho, who was born and raised in the United States. When he is around, Helena asks Pancho to help her translate memos or documents from the school.

*Cuando de repente te llega un papelito, una notita que nada que ver, y ah caray y ahora ¿qué es esto, y de qué se trata, y ora hija? Y me entra la duda, y luego qué hago, pues me espero, a que venga alguien, una estudiante o Pancho, el sobrino de Ezequiel, y le digo, oye Pancho, fíjate que no entiendo muy bien y ya me dicen.*

When all of the sudden there is a paper, a note that I do not understand, oh, well, what is this? What is this about? Now what? And I doubt; what can I do? Well I wait for someone to come, a student or Pancho, Ezequiel's nephew, and I say, hey Pancho, there is something I don't quite understand, and he tells me.

Helena's affordance network consists of family and friends like her nephew Pancho. Furthermore, as Helena points out in the previous quote, she receives help from her nephew or the students. The service-learning students have an important role in Helena's communication network as I describe below.

### **The Service-Learning Students**

Additions to Helena's affordance network come as new service-learning students visit her home every academic semester. As a long-time participant of the service-learning program, Helena has come to know several student participants. These students also became friends with the family and provided an important supplement for Helena's affordance network. The students serve and have served as interpreters on multiple occasions, helping her deal with issues that are urgent for her, such as understanding bills, translating for her at doctor's appointments during her pregnancy, contacting social services, and running errands.

*Bueno, como que más atentos, como que más interesados en poderte ayudarte a ti en tus necesidades, en que saben perfectamente, que, que no hablas mucho inglés, y que, que tienes necesidades tal vez no sé, tal vez en la escuela o con en el médico, o simple cosas que biles [sic], o cosas así, que tú dices, huy pues tenemos este problema con esto y ni siquiera sabemos ni por qué, ni que pasó.*

Well, like more caring, more interested in helping you in your needs, they perfectly know you don't speak much English, and, and that you have needs, maybe, I don't know in the school, at the doctor's, or just simple things, like bills, or things like those. You say, oh well, I don't understand this problem with this and we don't even know why, why it happens.

The support provided by these students reinforced Helena's affordance network characterized by unequal access to resources because of immigrants' vulnerable place in the society (Hagan, 1998). In school-related situations, the service-learning students serve as liaisons for Helena. The students help her to fill out the necessary application forms and explain all the information required for registration. They share their cultural capital when helping her with school related processes. Over time, Helena's confidence and experience in the process built up so she could do more and more on her own.

*Al principio, al principio pues sí de los estudiantes del programa de la señora Kris, pues siempre ellos ya están disponibles para esas fechas y siempre decía, oye fíjate que voy a inscribir a los niños y quizás no sepa, o no entienda mucho algo.*

At the beginning, at the beginning, well yes, the students in Mrs. Kris, program, well they are always available for those dates, and I will say, I have to register the children, and maybe I would not know something, or understand something thoroughly.

The students serve an important role in Helena's affordance network. Mainly the students are available during the academic years, specifically at times which are crucial in the interaction with the schools such as registration and parent-teacher conferences. Different to previous research that exemplifies how limited knowledge of English negatively impact immigrant parent's ability to stay involved in their children's education (Fillmore, 2000; Olsen, 2000; Worthy, 2006), Helena's relationship with the service-learning students has helped her bridge the communication gap with the schools and thereby keep her connected to her children's teachers at schools.

The service-learning students who are native English speakers also function as cultural brokers for Helena (Tilley-Lubbs, 2007). The support provided by the students reinforced

Helena's affordance network characterized by unequal access to resources because of immigrants' vulnerable place in the society (Hagan, 1998). For instance, chores and problems related to billing information are easy to understand for the students, saving a significant amount of time for Helena from what would be required if she had to figure out the issues by herself. In school-related situations, the service-learning students serve as interpreters during Parent-Teacher conferences, translating school memos for her, and giving support with the registration process.

### **Getting Help from Her Oldest Daughter**

Helena does not rely solely on the service-learning students for help. Her daughter Esmeralda also serves as an interpreter for her mother but only as a last resource. With the amount of information coming home, Helena had to develop a system to keep from missing something important. For instance, Helena asks Pancho or the service-learning students to help her understand the information in the many papers and memos the school sends to her. Subsequently, Helena has become increasingly familiar with the information teachers send with her children. When Helena does not completely understand the issue and has no other resource, then she asks Esmeralda for help.

On other occasions, when Esmeralda's interpreting skills are not equal to the situation Helena will look for other resources. For example, during one of my visits to Helena she received information about placing Esmeralda in an advanced arts class. Helena waited for me to help her understand the documents before moving forward, and since we were not sure what she needed to submit she went ahead and sent a note to the teacher, followed by a meeting.

While Esmeralda serves as an interpreter, most of the time she only corroborates Helena's hypothesis of what the document contains. Helena's use of Esmeralda is to confirm or

clarify what she believes is the nature of a document. Once Helena is convinced that she understands, she signs, and sends the document back to school.

*Por ejemplo, cuando me mandan tantos papeles, (...) pues leo y lo que no entiendo ahora Esmeralda me ayuda. Como ahora Esmeralda entiende bastante. Entonces le digo, Esmeralda, hija no entiendo aquí, ayúdame, y ya me dice, ah, mami dice esto, esto y esto, y yo ah, ok. Y ya que estoy convencida de que es eso que pensaba entonces firmo.*

For example, when they send me all those papers (...) well I read, and what I do not understand now Esmeralda helps me, because, now she understands quite a lot. Then I tell her, Esmeralda, honey, I don't understand here, help me, then she tells me, oh, mom, it says this, this, and this, and then I understand. Then when I am convinced that that is what I was thinking then I sign.

In case the information is not complete, Helena sends a note for the teacher to clarify the information. Esmeralda is responsible for bringing the answer back to her mother. When this happens Helena receives a clarification note from the teacher, which helps her resolve the issue at hand. Once she understands and becomes familiar with the issues, Helena finds it easier to figure out by herself what is needed the next time she receives information related to a given subject.

In summary, Helena like many other immigrant parents has to look for resources to contact and develop a relationship with her children's schools. She has built an *affordance network* to make contact and maintain communication with the schools. Helena has a variety of interpreters to call upon. Friends and family members are the first resource for Helena to reach the school (Valdés, 2003). She receives help from friends and family, like her nephew Pancho, and a considerable amount of support from the service-learning students. In school-related

situations, the service-learning students serve as interpreters during Parent-Teacher conferences, translating school memos for her, and giving support with the registration process.

### **Sandra**

To communicate and maintain communication with the schools Sandra uses three main strategies. First, she uses her own language skills to read the information the school sends. Second, she asks for help from friends and family or uses the interpreters that the school provides to attend parent-teacher conferences or meetings at the school. And third, she asks her daughter Karen to interpret or translate for her.

For the most part, Sandra relies on her English abilities to make sense of school documents. From the time of my first visit, Sandra was eager to point out that she can read English and only asks for help when she does not understand. Eventually, Sandra will ask for help from friends who speak English, like her friend Stephanie, who is a teacher, or from me. For example, during one of my visits, Sandra asked me to help her with a school note related to lunches. Another time we went to the doctor's office to take the small children. Sandra went through the visit without my help, looking confident that she understands quite well. Furthermore, Sandra mentioned that her husband also knows some English. Thus, it is Luis' duty to attend some school-related responsibilities like attending open-lunch days with their oldest son Armando.

### **Using the School Resources**

To attend Parent- Teacher conferences or meetings at the school, Sandra uses the interpreters the school provides. As she recalled, the first time she went to the school they provided her with an interpreter. Because she learned she has access to an interpreter in the school, Sandra continued asking for the service.

*Pues siempre he ido con una persona que me, que me ayuda. O sea no voy aquí vengo y ya, la primera vez la señora que era, que es esposa del patrón de Luis, que Luis llegó a trabajar ahí al rancho, ella es este, ella antes era como, maestra o directora de las escuelas, o sea ella trabajó en las escuelas. Entonces cuando fuimos a apuntar a Karen, ella nos dijo como apuntar a Karen, que hacer y todo, entonces ya fui con ella y ahí ya, llevaron a una traductora, hice todos los trámites con una traductora.*

Well, I have always gone with someone that helps me. I mean, I will not just show up, the first time the lady was, the wife of Luis' boss. Luis started working at the ranch, she is, she was like, a teacher, a director or a school, I finished she worked at the schools. So we went to register Karen, she told us how to register Karen, what to do, and everything, so we went with her, and there, they brought an interpreter, I did all the paper work with the interpreter.

Sandra sees that having access to an interpreter is a benefit for the community (Lopez, et al., 2001). In the literature, researchers discuss the importance of the teachers' practices to include parents as a way to increase the interactions between parents and children at home (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). In this case, the ESL teacher views providing a translator for the parent-teacher conferences as one of her duties, thus supporting Sandra's parental involvement in the school:

*Si las escuelas, siempre, tú puedes pedir una [interprete] o hay una, como, la maestra que da inglés como segundo lenguaje. Ella se encarga de conseguir un traductor. Así se ha involucrado, como trabaja con varias familias hispanas, se ha involucrado dentro de, de los servicios que consiguen los hispanos y por medio de ellos consiguen una traductora. Cada vez que tengo alguna junta grande o por ejemplo, más en middle school*

*[sic], donde no es un solo maestro es como la secundaria que son varios maestros juntan a todos los maestros de un jalón, va una traductora y ya, me dicen cómo va y que calificaciones tiene, si está fallando en algo, y así, cositas así.*

Yes, at school, always, you can always ask for one [interpreter] or there is one, like the teacher that teaches English as a second language. She takes care of looking for an interpreter. That way she has become involve, she works with several Hispanic families. She has become involved in the services that Hispanics receives, and through them you can get an interpreter. Every time that I have a large meeting for instance, in middle school, where there is not only one teacher, is like in middle school that there are different teachers, they bring all the teachers together, at the same time, and the interpreter goes and that's it, she tells me how they are doing with grades, if something is wrong, things like that.

For Sandra, the relationship with the ESL teacher is crucial to communicate and maintain communication with the schools. It is the ESL teacher that provides the affordance network to support Sandra's goal of communication. At Sandra's children school, the ESL teacher looks for interpreters for the parents. As Travieso-Parker (2006) posits, the role of ESL teachers as agents of transformation and positive change is crucial to help second language learners expand their visions of themselves and move forward in their educational achievement. In this case, the involvement of the ESL teacher supports Sandra's goal of communicating with the school, reinforcing her goal not only to have her children attain an education, but to excel as well.

### Her Oldest Daughter

Sandra's oldest daughter Karen also takes on the role of interpreting for her mother. However, Karen's role is very specific in terms of what Sandra asks her to do. For instance, Karen helps Sandra proofread notes she sends to the teacher.

*Al principio que mandaba notas con Karen de que no iba a la escuela por esto o que se yo, yo creo que cometía tantas faltas de ortografía y de cómo, o sea muchos errores, pero pues así aprendí. Ahora ya le digo, Karen así está escrito bien, ah sí, mamá o no, le falta esto y esto, ya me ayuda, pero procuro hacerlo yo para no, porque si es muchísima ayuda Karen, muchísima ayuda ahora.*

At the beginning I would send notes with Karen, because she did not go to school, or anything else, I believe that I make so many spelling mistakes, many errors, but that I show I learned. Now I ask Karen, is this well written? Yes, Mom, or no you are missing this and this, she helps me, but I try to do it myself, because she is so much help now, so much help!

Now that Karen is older, her main responsibility as an interpreter is to help translate her younger siblings' homework assignments to her mother. In this way Sandra can learn what the homework is about and make sure the child completes the assignment. Sandra clearly asserts that although Karen translates for her, it is her responsibility, as the mother, to make sure each child finishes their homework. In the following conversation Sandra explained to me how Karen supports her siblings with homework chores:

*Mm, cuando yo no entiendo algo para la tarea, ya me dice ella, me ayuda más bien a mí, no a los niños, a mí. A Rosita pues no, no le dejan tarea, pero Armando por ejemplo ahora ya no tanto, pero cuando estaba más chiquito, que con las palabras, el espiling*

*[sic] que le llaman y todo eso, es con lo que yo le pedía ayuda a Karen, Pero que Karen, aparte de que no tiene paciencia, que Karen se ponga con su hermano, no. Sólo en donde he pedido ayuda es en el que Armando lea y como Karen entiende muy bien en inglés, que ella escuche si realmente está leyendo bien y pronunciando bien.*

Mm, well when I don't understand something for the homework she tells me, she helps me not the children. Rosita does not have homework yet, but with Armando, for example, now not so much, but when he was younger, with words, with espiling *[sic]* (spelling) as they call it, all that, is when I asked Karen for help. Because Karen, besides that she does not have the patience to do it, I would not make her to do the homework with her brother, no. The only time I have asked Karen for help with Armando is for reading. Because Karen understands English well, she has to listen if he is reading okay, if he is pronouncing correctly.

Karen has an important role functioning as the interpreter or translator for her mother, but not of mothering her younger siblings. Karen's tasks were specifically targeted to help her mother with clarifying information about school homework and helping her siblings in specific English tasks that Sandra cannot do herself. Sandra was very conscious about not overwhelming Karen with responsibilities like taking care of her siblings. She was also very clear that mothering her children was her obligation and no one else's. Karen's tasks were specifically targeted to help her mother with clarifying information about homework and helping her siblings in specific English tasks that Sandra cannot do herself. Karen's role as interpreter was to serve Sandra in her affordance network to navigate the English world.

In summary, to communicate and maintain communication with the schools Sandra uses two main strategies. First, she uses her own language skills to read the information the school

sends. Second, she uses the interpreters that the school provides. Sandra was eager to point out that she can read English. According to Sandra she only asks for help from friends when she does not understand a new concept or procedure, but for the most part she relies on her English abilities to make sense of school documents. When she needs to be physically at school, Sandra prefers using official interpreters provided by the school to attend Parent-Teacher conferences or meetings at the school.

### **Mercedes and Jose Luis**

Since the Hernandezes self-reported knowing limited English, the quality of interpretation is of high importance to them. For the most part they rely upon and value the help from their Spanish-speaking friends, particularly from Mrs. Perez, a woman originally from Puerto Rico. The Hernandezes met Mrs. Perez when Mercedes was pregnant with their youngest daughter. Mrs. Perez was an interpreter at the local hospital, who interpreted for them during Mercedes' pregnancy. Afterwards they kept calling her when they needed help attending parent-teacher conferences. The Hernandezes pointed out that they feel more comfortable with Mrs. Perez interpreting for them since she is a native Spanish speaker.

### **School Resources**

Since Mercedes cannot read and write, her husband, Jose Luis is the main contact person with the schools. Jose Luis takes phone calls, reads school documents, and attends parent-teacher conferences. In addition to asking for help from Mrs. Perez, they use the interpreters provided by the school to navigate the school system. They rely on their older children as interpreters for everyday tasks, like setting appointments with health providers. Even in the school setting Jose Luis mentioned that he prefers the help of those interpreters whose first language is Spanish rather than those who are native English speakers for accuracy purposes. For instance, he points

out that when they first arrived in town, there was a student volunteer at the school who was of Cuban descent. She would help the Hernandezes register their children, translate at parent-teacher conferences, and translate to Spanish important school documents for them to read.

*Cuando nosotros llegamos y nuestras niñas empezaron a estudiar [en la escuela] había una muchacha. Ella hija de papá cubano y su mamá parece que era americana, y, y ella era voluntaria en la escuela, y ella nos ayudó. Nos traducía a nosotros cuando, cuando las maestras nos mandaban un, una carta, para informarnos equis cosa de los niños, un evento, lo que fuera ella lo traducía y lo enviaba a la casa o cuando, cuando, este, había una conferencia, ella nos traducía para podernos entender con las maestras.*

When we arrived, when our daughters started school, there was a girl. Her father was Cuban and her mother I think she was American and she helped us. She was a volunteer in the school, she helped us. She translated for us when, when the teachers sent us, a letter, to inform us about things with the children, an event, whatever, she would translate it for us and send it to the house. When there was a conference, she translated for us to make ourselves understood with the teachers.

The Hernandezes expressed a great need for interpreters that were not only bilingual but bicultural, which reinforces Bohon's (2005) assertion that bilingual and bicultural educators can bridge the communication gap between the school administration and the parents. Parents feel more connected to people that not only understand their language but also their cultural values and needs. Looking for resources to complement their affordance network the Hernandezes found Mrs. Perez and the volunteer at the school to help them translate and interpret for them. Unfortunately, because of the limited availability of interpreters, Jose Luis has gone to the school

and had to rely solely on his English language skills; making his connection to the school system weak at best.

*Hay veces que yo he ido a las conferencias sólo y a veces me da pena y, no sé porque las maestras me están explicando en cosas que no entiendo, y a veces les hago como mueca de que sí, pero no estoy entendiendo exactamente lo que me están diciendo, cosas entiendo pero no exactamente lo que me están diciendo.*

There are some times that I have gone to the conferences by myself, and I don't know but sometimes I feel embarrassed, because the teachers are explaining things that that I don't understand, sometimes I made a face like I understand, but I do not understand exactly what they're saying, I understand some things but not exactly what they're telling me.

Jose Luis exemplifies the assertion that misunderstandings arisen from parent's limited fluency in the new language negatively impact their ability to stay involve in their children's education (Fillmore, 2000; Olsen, 2000; Worthy, 2006). Despite his limited English proficiency Jose Luis tries to go to parent-teacher conferences, but he is under the impression that the teachers are saying much more than what he can understand. Jose Luis interest is to participate in the school and in his children education but without a proper interpreter is hard for him to communicate and to understand the school teachers. The findings in Jose Luis and Mercedes case confirms that parents with limited English proficiency, who have less access to proper interpreters (Bohon, 2005), may be unable to bridge the language gap with the schools (Worthy, 2006; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006).

### **Their Own Children**

The Hernandezes also use their older children as interpreters, most often their eldest daughter Lilia, who is 16 years old. Mercedes uses the help of her daughters on a daily basis to

set up appointments and to call service providers. Although they like and welcome their help, the Hernandezes also recognize the fact that their children do not have as comprehensive a vocabulary in Spanish as they have in English. Consequently, they consider their children's limited knowledge of Spanish equivalent to having an English speaker serving as their interpreter.

*Eso ha pasado varias veces, hay a veces algunas personas, mismo americanas que, que ellas, mhm, tratan de traducirnos pero, también es difícil para ellas de traducirnos porque tampoco entendemos exactamente lo que nos quieren decir. Incluso con mi hijos, ellos sí entienden el inglés y todo pero hay cosas que, que ellos no pueden traducirnos (...) saben lo que están diciendo pero explicarnos en español no, no, no lo pueden explicar porque ellos no entienden que significado tienen esas palabras [en español].*

That has happened several times, sometimes there are some people, even American, that, they, hmm, they try to translate for us, but, it is also difficult for them to translate for us because we don't understand exactly what they mean. Even with our kids, they understand English and everything but there are things that they cannot translate (...) they know what they are saying but they cannot explain us in Spanish, no, no, they cannot explain, because they don't understand the meaning those words have [in Spanish].

The Hernandez parents prefer native Spanish speakers even to their own children. For the Hernandezes, native Spanish speakers have the Spanish skills and ability to explain concepts in necessary detail. Native Spanish speakers who serve as interpreters are more welcome than English speakers with some Spanish knowledge. For example, after the first interview they mentioned they needed to go to the school because their oldest son has a learning disability.

They were called by the middle school teachers to hold a parent-teacher conference. I asked them if I could come to observe the interaction between them and the school. The Hernandezes specifically asked the school for an interpreter; however, when we arrived, the school personnel assumed I was there to interpret for them. At the request of all parties, I served the Hernandezes as an interpreter. Afterwards, the Hernandezes mentioned how grateful they were that I was there to help out. They pointed out that with a native Spanish speaker as their interpreter they can better understand the school requirements and communicate better their desires to the school personnel.

In summary, since Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez self-reported knowing limited English, the quality of interpretation is of high importance to them. For the most part they rely upon and value the help from their Spanish-speaking friends. Since Mercedes cannot read and write, her husband, Jose Luis is the main contact person with the schools. They use the interpreters provided by the school, and their older children for everyday tasks such as setting appointments with health care providers. The Hernandezes also use their older children as interpreters, mainly their eldest daughter. Although they like and welcome their help, the Hernandezes recognize the fact that their children do not have as comprehensive vocabulary in Spanish as they have in English. Consequently, they consider their children's limited knowledge of Spanish equivalent to having an English speaker serving as their interpreter (Bohon, 2005). Still, their children are an important part of the affordance network for Mercedes and Jose Luis.

### **Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

The first research question in this study focuses on understanding what kinds of communication channels Mexican immigrant parents use to reach their children's schools. I used the notion of funds of knowledge in order to describe how parents survive in a language

unknown to them. In the first part of this section, I have described the practice of using interpreters to communicate and maintain contact with the school. In the second part of this section, I will discuss differences and similarities across cases and I will interpret the findings through the lenses of the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 2005). I present a summary table, a description of the main similarities and differences across cases, and then I discuss the interpretation of the findings and the main contributions of this research to the knowledge base.

Parents who have limited English skills have to find ways to bridge the language gap to communicate with teachers and administrators (Crozier & Davies, 2005; Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Worthy, 2006). The findings from this research demonstrate that interpreters are essential for parents to fulfill the goal of communication and to bridge the gap with teachers and administrators. In the following chart, I present each family’s common interpreter resources in order of preference:

Table 8

*Use of Interpreters by Order of Preference in Each Case Study*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Interpreters</b>
<b>Helena</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Service-learning students</li> <li>- Extended family</li> <li>- Friends</li> <li>- Oldest daughter</li> <li>- Interpreters at the school</li> </ul>
<b>Sandra</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interpreters at the school</li> <li>- Friends</li> </ul>

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	- Oldest daughter
	- Husband
<b>Mercedes</b>	- Husband Jose Luis
	- Friends
	- Own children
<b>Jose Luis</b>	- Friends
	- Interpreters at the school
	- Own children.

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As the table shows there is an array of interpreting resources that could be identified in the participant's affordance network. The commonality across cases is the presence of friends and children as interpreters (Valdés, 2003; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006). A key difference across cases is the relative order of preference of the aforementioned friends and children. Another difference is the size and variety of Helena's affordance network for interpreting as compared with the other participants; specifically Mercedes' network the most limited one.

### **Similarities Across Cases**

Findings show two main similarities across cases. The first similarity lies in the criteria for selecting interpreters, while the second one is the use of children and friends as interpreters. Parents choose different people from their affordance network based on their availability and proficiency of the interpreters, and their level of trust with them. For instance, on several occasions parents asked me to interpret or translate documents for them, since they assessed I was available at the time, am proficient in English, and have developed a relationship with them.

At other times, parents preferred other interpreters over me, for example, when Helena went to a Parent-Teacher conference she preferred to call the service-learning student. Based on Helena's experience, she foresaw the student would be available, the student's proficiency in the subject matter was greater than mine, and Helena also trusted the student. Consequently, I suggest that the parents' process of choosing an interpreter is based on the situation or context, the availability and disposition of the interpreter, and the interpreter's competence to better meet the parent's need.

The second similarity was the use of children and friends as interpreters. Previous literature has explained the experiences of immigrant communities based on the concept of social networks (Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998, Massey et al, 1987). For instance, it has been discussed how immigrants rely on personal relationships of family and friends to secure housing and employment in the receiving community (Hagan, 1998). However, researchers tend to overlook the variation of resources that immigrants can draw upon, and how these resources change in time (Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998). Findings in this research suggest that friends play an important role as interpreters in the parents' communication system. As parents develop friendship relationships over time in the community they are also expanding their affordance network for interpreting purposes. Families' preference to use children as interpreters suggests that the children's competence in English places them as part of the affordance network for their parents.

### **Differences Across Cases**

Two main differences can be identified across case studies regarding the parents' affordance network for interpreting purposes. The first difference was the size and variety of the network. For immigrant parents the affordance network is limited to the already in place unequal access to resources (Hagan, 1998). Access to institutional resources, material goods, and cultural

capital defines who they know in the community, who may become part of their affordance network. For instance, Mercedes relies on her husband to drive her around; when needed, they organize their schedules to accomplish any chores outside the house. This circumstance has limited Mercedes' flexibility to schedule working hours and to attend Parent-Teacher conferences. Helena and Sandra both have access to their own vehicle, and are thus more able to look for their own resources rather than waiting and organizing their schedules around their husband's work.

The second difference is the order of preferences for selecting people as interpreters, which is of particular interest when analyzing the role of friends and children in the affordance network for interpreting. "Affordance is a possibility for action by an individual" (Barab & Roth, p. 7). Therefore, when parents engage in an affordance network they open the possibility for action, which in this particular research context refers to parental involvement activities. The data reflects that parents have different preferences when selecting interpreters. Parents select resources in the network based on the particular situation that requires an action and the capabilities of the interpreter. Helena prefers using the service-learning students because they share with her their cultural capital and their understanding of the school system and life in the United States. Immigrant parents of low income such as Helena have unequal access to resources (Hagan, 1998). The service-learning students have expanded her affordance network and her access to information and expanded communication possibilities. As Helena pointed out, something that can take long hours for her to figure out was solved in minutes by the students. In Sandra's case she prefers the interpreters provided by the schools. She is able to communicate and maintain contact with the school because of her relationship with her son's ESL teacher (Travieso-Parker, 2006). Mercedes and her husband Jose Luis prefer to ask their friends who are

native Spanish speakers when they need interpreters. Because of the Hernandez' limited English skills they prefer an interpreter that conveys most accurately the message from the school and the Hernandezes' response back (Bohon, 2005). Findings in Jose Luis and Mercedes case confirm that limited access to appropriate interpreters (Bohon, 2005) may hinder parents to bridge the language gap with the schools (Worthy, 2006; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006).

In all the cases, their children were not the parents' main preference for interpreting purposes, as was shown in the table above. Given the family setting, children are the most convenient resource available to the parents, yet the larger their affordance network, the less the parents ask children to interpret for them (Worthy, 2006). For example, when I was around, the parents would rather ask me than their children to translate documents from the school.

Whenever parents can find another adult that better serves the interpreter purpose they would not ask the children. Based on these findings, I suggest further research should study the role of interpreter children as a part of a broader affordance network for interpreting.

## **Conclusion**

In this research, I propose the concept of the affordance network to understand how parents use interpreters to achieve their communication goal with the schools. Barab and Roth (2006) argue that when an individual has to fulfill a particular goal he/she selects resources inside the network in order to accomplish that goal. "An affordance network may be specified in the environment, it is available and of interest only to certain individuals who have particular goals and the requisite affectivity sets" (p.5). Parents choose different people from their affordance network based on the availability and proficiency of the interpreters, and level of trust with them. Findings of my research suggest that children are not the first preference for parents to accomplish certain interpreting tasks. Along with the use of interpreters, parents build upon

their use of English to communicate and maintain contact with the schools. In the following section, I will describe particular ways in which parents decode the written messages they receive from the school and how parents make decision and take actions in response.

### **Language Use**

Previously, I have described the use of interpreters as means to communicate with the school. In this section, I describe how parents build upon their own knowledge of the English language to decode messages from the school, to make decisions regarding parental involvement, and to take action in response to those messages. The section is organized as follows: first, I discuss the relevance of English use in immigrant communities. Second, I present the theoretical frameworks that underline the discussion of immigrant parents' English use in terms of situated learning and adult language acquisition. Third, I describe how participants use their knowledge of English for production and comprehension to communicate with the schools. Next, I present the cross case analysis and interpretation of findings based on the theoretical framework. Finally, I summarize the findings and present conclusions for this section.

### **The Role of English Use in Immigrant Communities**

Immigrant parents' language acquisition and English use for parental involvement can be framed in the context of the debate surrounding English use by immigrant families. A prevalent myth is that immigrants live their lives in the United States without making an effort to acquire the language (Auerbach, 1993; Valdés, 2001; Wright, 2007). Immigration opponents state that immigrants do not want to learn English (Olsen, 2000) while English-only supporters argue that the limited English proficiency of immigrant children results in low academic achievement (Worthy, 2006). However, available research does not support a direct correlation between the

family's immigration experience, the language that parents use at home, and children's academic success (Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Lopez, 2001; Olsen, 2000; Valdés, 2001; Waterman, 2008).

Contrary to the assumption that immigrant parents lack interest in learning English, parents acknowledge the value of this skill and consider it of high priority (Olsen, 2000; Waterman, 2006; Worthy, 2006). One of the biggest challenges that Mexican immigrant parents face in the United States is not being able to become proficient in the language of the country in which they have established their new lives. In a study with thirteen immigrant parents of Latin American origin, Worthy (2006) found that parents could get by on a daily basis with limited English proficiency. Nonetheless, all parents interviewed by Worthy believed that learning English could improve their overall quality of life. Immigrant parents believe that acquiring English proficiency can enhance their ability while helping their children with homework and their efficacy when communicating with teachers (Worthy, 2006). Although parents place learning English as a high priority, one common reason that prevents them from learning English is the limited time they have to study because of long working hours (Olsen, 2001, Wright, 2007; Worthy, 2006).

In some circumstances, immigrant parents can communicate in English regardless of their limited proficiency and fluency (Valdés, 2003). Most parents described that they understand much more than what they can express. However, immigrant parents associate the idea of learning English with the ability to speak the language fluently, which underestimates their comprehension skills and their functional capabilities in English (Valdés, 1996). Findings of my research question the assumption that immigrant parents are not capable or interested of learning English. Through my analysis of the case studies I will discuss strategies that immigrant parents use to decode school documents. I have found that despite parent's limited English proficiency

they make an effort to comply with parental involvement duties with the school. In the three case studies, parents use their knowledge of the English language to make sense of school documents and to communicate in response. Furthermore, I argue that parents are highly motivated to learn English and welcome all the opportunities to become involved in their children's education. My findings resonate with Waterman's (2008) assertion that suggests adult education is more effective when the goals and the context are authentic to the students. My data provides evidence that immigrant parents learn English in the context of their children's school experience where words have the content and the value that help them comply with parental involvement requirements. Following, I discuss findings on parents' English use using the theoretical frameworks of situated learning and English language use.

### **Second Language Use in the Framework of Sociocultural Theory and Situated Learning**

In this research, I discuss the phenomenon of immigrant parents' English use through the theoretical frameworks of sociocultural theory on second language acquisition and the notion of situated learning. Sociocultural theory provides a framework to understand immigrant parents' English acquisition in the context of how they organize and carry out their lives (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995). Through the lenses of sociocultural theory, acquiring a second language encompasses a dialectic interaction to create meaning of the world, "such interaction ultimately enhances an individual's understanding and ability to deploy linguistic phenomena for interpersonal and intrapersonal functions" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995, p. 110). Meaning is created in a dialogue rather between others or with the self. For Artigal (1992) language is acquired in a dialogic interaction when two individuals are engaged in goal-directed activities. I address how parents create meaning of parental involvement requirements and learn English when they engage in activities and interactions with their children's school.

The notion of situated learning aids to depict how parents learn specific words and strategies to decode meaning from school documents, which helps them make decisions, take actions, and maintain communication with the school's personnel (i.e., bus driver, secretary, teacher, or principal). "Situativity theorists have made clear the distinction between knowledge (e.g., facts or concepts) as "acquired" for a test, and knowing as participation in rich context where one gains an appreciation for both the content and the situations in which it has value (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, Greeno & Moore, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1988 as in Barab & Roth, 2006, p. 3)."

### **Case by Case Description on Language Use**

I organize the findings by participant and divided into in two categories: 1) learning for comprehension, and 2) learning for production (Ringbom, 2007). Findings presented in this section focus particularly on strategies parents develop for reading written documents. These strategies that help parents to understand key terms and ideas in the main source of information provided by the schools, which it is in the majority of cases in written format. This issue came across during the interview process when parents expressed that one way to get involved in their children's school was responding to the written documents they receive from the school. All parents responded that they can understand more English than what they can speak (Valdés, 2003). All parents self assessed their ability to understand English by responding to the written information sent by the schools. In the three cases, parents talked in detail about how they make sense of written documents, and how their response to the documents translates into actions they take to get involved in their children's education.

## Helena

### Comprehension

Helena strongly asserts that she would prefer not to depend on anyone else to understand English. She makes a considerable effort to understand school documents by herself and she tries to read all the school documents that arrive to her home. According to Helena, she can usually understand between 60 to 70% of a document.

*[Y] a mí, eso es lo que hago, todos los papeles por lo regular, casi, casi, que, yo no sé cuánto, a lo mejor un hay pues cuánto será que yo entiendo un papel, quizás un 70% un 60 un 70, un 100 no, pero quizás, un, más de la mitad sí.*

From all the papers [I understand] I don't know how much, I don't know how much I understand, well maybe a 70%, a 60 a 70% but not 100 per cent, but more than 50% yes.

Helena described in detail the strategies she uses to make sense of school documents. For instance, she looks for English words that are similar to Spanish ones; she identifies key words that relate to a specific action or event, for instance, when she needs to send money to the school for a particular event like the annual book fair; she looks for relevant information, like the time and date of an event; and she uses the dictionary to look up other words. Finding key words helps Helena discern when she needs to take action and what kind of action. For example, when she finds the words *book fair* she knows that the children can buy books in the school and that they need money to do so, she send them with enough change they can buy whatever they want. She also looks for keywords for the time and date of events.

Helena makes use of her own English skills to understand as much as possible of the particular document and situation. When in doubt Helena builds hypotheses based on the information she can interpret. Then confers with her daughter Esmeralda, the service-learning

students, or with her nephew Pancho to corroborate information, or formulate more specific questions and messages she wants to convey. She reaches out to these interpreters to corroborate information, ask questions and communicate a more elaborated message.

*Creo que entiendo más el inglés leyendo que ni hablando [...] Es lo que hago y muchas de las veces, tú sabes vea, muchas palabras que casi es lo mismo, que casi, muchas, muchas palabras, casi es, te suenan. Te suenan mucho, igual a veces por la t por la c, las pronunciaciones, pero es comprensible [sic],*

I think I understand more English by reading than by speaking [...] That is what I do, a lot of times, you know, a lot of words are the same, many, many words, they sound right. They sound similar, sometimes because of the t or the c, pronunciation, but it is understandable to me, that's, what I do.

In terms of listening comprehension Helena states that she finds information about the school in the local news. She turns on the television every morning to find out if there are incidents in the school or if classes are cancelled because of bad weather. *Siempre estoy viendo las noticias porque sé que ahí van a estar informándote todo.* [I'm always watching the news because I know they will be informing you about everything.]

### **Language Production**

For Helena, communicating even with simple English words and phrases is better than not being able to communicate at all. In terms of language production, Helena asserts that she can read more English than she can speak. Still, she makes an effort to communicate by herself with the school and to set up appointments with social service providers. Helena expresses that her English is good enough to explain symptoms to a nurse if the children get sick. She can describe the symptoms with what she calls *simple* words.

*Pero con lo simple que me comunico, me logran entender y me hacen mi cita o me dicen ven ya y al instante vamos, y así. Es que yo digo, que no debe depender nunca de nadie.*

I communicate with simple words, and they understand me, they make an appointment for me, or if they say we need to go in that moment we go. I would say, one should not depend on others.

In terms of written communication, Helena utilizes her English skills by sending brief notes to teachers; for instance, when she wants to pick up her children early or if they are sick. Writing and sending notes enables Helena to establish a direct dialogue with the teacher and the school personnel.

*Por ejemplo, yo mando notas a la escuela cuando yo quiero recoger a ellos para una cita médica o para un, o porque ellos quieren que yo vaya y los recoja yo tengo que mandar una nota, yo no puedo llegar y recogerlos nomas así, entonces, mis notas yo creo que son breves pero entendibles porque las entienden.*

For example, I send notes to the schools when I want to pick them up for a doctor's appointment, and for, or when they want me to go and pick them, I have to send a note. I cannot just get there and pick them up like that, so, I believe my notes are understandable because they understand them.

Helena can fulfill basic communication needs with the school by sending notes to the teacher and by using her limited English oral production. However, she wishes she could practice to improve her oral proficiency. Helena practices her English skills by reading books in English to her children. Although she mispronounces some words and the children make fun of her, she keeps trying to improve her English communication skills. Helena expressed she would like to practice more with native English speakers. *Pero, quizás si yo practicara pues si lo hablara,*

*pero pues como no, no practico.* [Well, if I would practice, I would speak better, but no, I do not practice.]

In summary, Helena uses a number of strategies to make sense of the documents sent by the school, she identifies English words that are similar in Spanish; builds a hypothesis about the meaning of the document based on the key words; and then she confirms information with her daughter, the service-learning students, or with her nephew Pancho. Helena describes that her English oral production is good enough to communicate with the school and social service providers with *simple* words. Regarding written communication, Helena sends brief notes back and forth in order to have a dialogue with the teacher and school personnel. Although, Helena's English use helps her to engage in basic communication with the school, she expresses interest in improving her skills and she acknowledges her opportunities for practicing English are limited. Helena wishes she could practice to improve her oral proficiency. She practices her language skills by listening to the local news in English and by trying to read to her children in English.

### **Sandra**

#### **Comprehension**

When I asked Sandra how she received information about the school she acknowledged that it is through written documents, "*papeles*" [papers], which is how the school sends information for the parents. She was assertive in expressing that she can read almost everything that the documents say.

*Yo sé inglés, no sé hablarlo exactamente 100% pero lo que dice ahí, la mayoría de todo yo lo sé leer.* [I know English, I cannot speak exactly 100% but what says there, the majority I know how to read it.]

In terms of understanding documents in written form Sandra uses also a number of strategies to read documents in English such as: identifying key words; looking for relevant information in the text like dates and times; and inferring the main message of the document.

*Pero si más o menos sé lo que tratan de decir en, en estas cosas, mira por ejemplo aquí, “de padre a padre”, no si, por ejemplo, [mostrándome los papeles] y luego ésta de Rosita cuando iba a ir a un fieldtrip [sic] a un paseo para las calabazas y todo eso. Mira todos esos papeles mandas, y así yo todo por medio de papeles te digo.*

But yes, more or less I know what they want to say, on this things, for example, “from parent to parent,” or, for instance [showing me the papers] and then there is this one from Rosita when she went to a “fieldtrip” to a trip to see pumpkins, and all that. Look at all these papers you have to send, and like that, all through papers, I’m telling you.

Although Sandra is able to read basic documents others are harder for her to read. For example, when the school sends information about literacy activities that the parents can do with the children at home. It is harder for Sandra to perform those activities when the document has complex explanations, or does not involve a non-recurrent activity. In the case of the parent-children activities, Sandra knew the activities were optional so she does not feel obligate to participate.

In terms of listening comprehension, Sandra can conduct herself in a variety of conversations in public settings. Sandra is able to understand phone calls from the school teachers and respond to questions over the phone. Her decoding of oral messages is fairly accurate and enables her to go by herself to the doctor’s office and other appointments. However, when she attends parent-teacher conferences, she uses the interpreting services offered by the school due to the increased complexity of the messages.

## Language Production

In terms of language production, Sandra communicates with the teacher by sending brief notes about her children's attendance and other related issues. Sandra has learned to organize the information for the teacher so it is easy to understand the message she wants to convey. Sandra writes the date, the child's name, and the reason why he or she would be missing school. Sandra explained that she learned to write notes in English just by doing them, with no further instruction by anyone. Although the notes may have some grammar or spelling mistakes, they serve their purpose to communicate Sandra's messages across. Now that her daughter Karen is old enough, she usually proofreads her mother's notes for grammar and spelling.

*Al principio que mandaba notas con Karen de que no iba a la escuela por esto o que se yo, yo creo que cometía tantas faltas de ortografía y de cómo, o sea muchos errores, [se ríe] pero pues así aprendí.*

At the beginning that I sent notes with Karen that she did not go to school for this or that reason, I think I made so many spelling mistakes, and, many mistakes [she laughs] but that is how I learned.

Karen also has the role of helping her mother to understand homework assignments for her younger siblings. She supports her siblings' English development by verifying and correcting their pronunciation. Sandra asks her son to read at home some texts in Spanish and she corrects him if needed. She also makes sure her son practices reading aloud in English; but in terms of pronunciation she has to rely on Karen to verify that he is reading and pronouncing correctly.

*Por ejemplo, yo pongo a leer a Armando pero en español, y yo le corrijo como se pronuncian las palabras, pero en inglés no puedo, porque yo no sé exactamente como se pronuncia.*

For instance, I ask Armando to read but in Spanish, I correct him about pronunciation, but in English I can't, because I do not know exactly how things are pronounced.

Besides sending notes to the school, Sandra did not mention any other instance when she would use her written or verbal English skills. However, during one of my visits I accompanied Sandra to the doctor's office and I observed Sandra's oral production while interacting with the nurse. Sandra was able to communicate well by herself. Even when the situation became more complicated due to a change in the schedule, she was able to reschedule the appointment by following the nurse's indications. When she attends parent-teacher conferences, she uses the interpreting services offered by the school to be able to communicate her message in a more accurately and prompt manner.

In summary, Sandra asserted that she knows enough English to understand the documents she receives from the school. Some of the strategies that Sandra uses to decode school documents include: identification of key words; search of relevant information in the document like dates and times; and inference of the main message in the document. Sandra has a hard time reading documents that have more complex structure or that refer to a school activity that does not happen very often. Sandra stated that she is more proficient in written communication, as compared to oral production. Sandra writes brief notes to the school teachers and has developed a system to organize the information in the notes so the message is easier to understand for the teachers. Sandra specifies date, time, the reason for the note, and asks her daughter Karen to proofread for grammar or spelling mistakes. Regarding oral communication, Sandra goes by herself to the doctors' office and other appointments. Although her oral skills are limited, she is able to communicate with short phrases.

## Mercedes and Jose Luis

### Comprehension

Mercedes and Jose Luis assert that they also receive a significant number of written documents from the school. Because Jose Luis is the only one that reads and writes, he is in charge of reading and looking over the documents. Additionally, they told me that sometimes the teachers contact Jose Luis by phone when there is an early release, or if the school is closed for some reason.

In order to make sense of school documents Jose Luis uses the following reading strategies: he gets hints by following the organization of the document; he finds key words, like *fieldtrip*; and he uses his understanding of key ideas to build hypotheses that he corroborates with his children. Jose Luis points out that he understands *pocas letras* [few words]:

*Este y yo sí trato de, de leerlos, sí sé lo que es un, ya cuando hay un fieldtrip [sic], un viaje de los niños si van a llevar su lunche [sic], eso, esas cosas, este, que son, pocas letras verdad, que sí entiendo.*

I do, I try to read them, when there is a fieldtrip, a trip for the children, if they will take their lunche [sic], those things, that are, few words, I do understand.

Although, Jose Luis pointed out that he gets frustrated sometimes because his children do not always accurately translate the documents. With his limited knowledge of English and with the information provided by the children, he still infers limited meaning from the documents.

*Entiendo unas cosas, otras, mm, se las pregunto a mis hijos, que quiere decir. A veces yo me desespero con ellos porque parece tal que yo entiendo más cuando les digo, a ver di, les doy un papel le digo, dime que quiere decir esto, y ellos me lo tan supuestamente*

*traduciendo al español, pero si yo no entendiera un poco inglés, saldría lo mismo yo no entendería ni que, ni que es lo que me están diciendo ellos.*

I understand few things, others, mm; I ask to my children what does it says. Sometimes, I get frustrated with them, because it seems like I understand more when I tell them, ok tell me, I gave them the piece of paper, tell me what does this say, and they are supposedly translating to Spanish, but if I would not understand a little bit of English, it would be the same, I would not understand a word of what they are telling me.

Despite the fact that Jose Luis corresponds with school, he does not get involved in homework. Jose Luis and Mercedes express with frustration that they are not able to support their children's learning at home. Jose Luis mentioned that he can barely understand school documents, but when it is about homework or material their children are learning at school, he cannot help them anymore.

*Incluso ayer antier me estaba comentando la más grande y ella me dice, fíjate que tengo un proyecto sobre Hernán Cortes, ¿quién era Hernán Cortes? Le digo, no pues le digo, Hernán Cortes sí lo escuche, pero yo no sé que hizo Hernán Cortes (se ríe). No dice es que tengo que investigar sobre Hernán Cortes, y sobre otros de Perú, y otras personas no sé de dónde, y como le digo yo, aparte mis problemas que yo tengo, pues no.*

Even yesterday, the day before yesterday the oldest one she was telling me, "I have a project about Hernan Cortes, who was Hernan Cortes?" I responded, I don't know, I said. I heard about Hernan Cortes, but I don't know what Hernan Cortes did (he laughs). No, she said, I have to find out about Hernan Cortes, and others from Peru, and other people I don't know where, and as I told her, besides all the problems I have, well no.

Jose Luis points out, he can read, write, do some basic math, but nothing more. He sees himself as providing little help for his children when it comes to completing homework assignments. Looking for ways to help them out is overwhelming to him and one more thing he has to do besides caring for the household.

### **Mercedes' English Comprehension**

Mercedes has a job at a fast food restaurant, and I asked her how she performs her job if she cannot read and write. Mercedes pointed out that she knows how to read the orders at the restaurant; she memorized the names of the orders. In fact, the system allowed Mercedes to have hands-on experience, and since it is a food chain she can pay attention to everybody else at the table. Then she pays attention to the computer so she can distinguish what was ordered.

*Nosotros trabajamos generalmente hay una mesa así larga no, hay una persona que pone pan y hay otra persona que esta checando que la que se hace responsable de checar lo que están pidiendo, o sea que lo está haciendo, es lo que yo le estoy diciendo, yo aprendí ahí, es lo que yo no entiendo, bueno será porque frecuentemente me ponían ahí en la mesa, pero yo poniendo como las carnes para envolver la hamburguesa, ya después yo estuve checando y checando, como era que iban y como las pedían, y que hamburguesa era y como era, y ya así fue que aprendí.*

We all work, generally there is a long table, and there is a person that sets the bread, then there is another person that is checking, the one that is responsible of looking at what people ask for, I mean, what it is saying, it is what I am telling you, that's how I learned. Well I don't understand, I mean it might have been because I was frequently at the table, but I was placing the meats to wrap the burger, then I was checking and checking, how it

was that they go, how do they asked for the, what was the burger, and how was done, that's how I learned.

At work Mercedes taught herself to place the letters together in order to make sense of the words that appeared on the screen. She was able to identify and place meaning to the items she needed to prepare. It was in the context of the workplace that Mercedes could give meaning to some of the words in English and help her get by and earn the check she misses now, since she only work a few hours during the weekends.

### **Language Production**

Besides being able to read orders, Mercedes can understand enough English to follow directions. Whatever she's required to do, she does. I asked Mercedes how she knows what to do and she said that she cannot explain it to me but she follows the directions given to her while she's at work. Mercedes explains:

*Le entiendo pero no puedo hablarlo, cuando dicen necesito que limpien acá, que barran, trapien [sic] a todo eso, o que limpien atrás, así entiendo pero no lo hablo porque no lo puedo decir, pero sí entiendo.*

I understand, I cannot talk, but when they say I need you to clean here, to sweep here, to mop over there, to clean in the back, I do understand, but I do not speak because I don't know how to say things, but I do understand.

Mercedes says she cannot speak English at all. However, she pointed out that sometimes she needs to pick up the children from school. Then she has to ask her manager to leave work early and ask a co-worker or a friend to go with her to pick up the children. When I asked her how she did it, she said that it was half in Spanish, half in English, and some body language, *a señas* [by signs].

In summary, In terms of language production and language comprehension Jose Luis and Mercedes explain they had limited communication skills. Jose Luis described that he can read English in a limited capacity. He is able to understand *pocas letras* [few words] from the documents the school sends to the home. Jose Luis uses his English to read the school documents when his children cannot explain accurately what the document is about. Mercedes had little to do with the school. The main interactions were carried by Jose Luis thus Mercedes did not take care about school issues. Mercedes uses her English language skills in the work place. Although she does not read and write she knew the alphabet and taught herself to read the orders at work. Mercedes comprehension skills are better than her production skills, for instance she mentioned that she cannot speak but she can understand English to follow orders. When she needs to get out of work to pick up the children, Mercedes is able to ask the manager to leave and to ask for a ride from a co-worker to get to the school. She communicates in Spanish, with a few words in English and by signs.

### **Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings**

The first research question in this study focuses on understanding what kinds of communication channels Mexican immigrant parents use to reach their children's schools. To interpret the findings for this section, I made a distinction between learning English for production and learning English for comprehension (Ringbom, 2007) to describe how parents use their language skills in the context of parental involvement practices. I describe how parents build upon their own knowledge of English to decode messages from the school, to make decisions regarding parental involvement, and to take actions in response. In this section, I will interpret the findings through the lenses of the theoretical framework of second language acquisition in the framework of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Panvlenko, 1995) and situated

learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I will highlight the strategies parents use to comply with parental involvement requirement from the school, particularly to decode written documents. Parents in the study assert they receive a significant amount of information from the school in written form. I will also discuss trends in the preference of certain strategies, and similarities and differences across cases. Finally, I discuss the interpretation of the findings and the main contributions of this research to the base knowledge.

In the literature related to immigrant parents and parental involvement, researchers have described situations where parents' limited proficiency in English prevent parents from becoming involved in ways that school counts as parental involvement. For instance, working long hours hinder parent's possibilities to learn English and limit their time to participate in afterschool activities. Furthermore, Waterman (2008) pointed out that besides the language barrier, mothers in her study reported feeling they have a limited understanding of the curriculum taught at school, and little awareness of how the school system works in the United States. The findings from my research demonstrate that, despite the challenges, immigrant parents use their knowledge of English and make a constant effort to learn and comply with parental involvement requirements from school. Although they do not volunteer or attend PTA meeting parents drive their efforts to respond to school demands. My research provides evidence of the high value that families place on English usage for everyday life and parental involvement activities. All parents described they understand much more English than what they can express. Jose Luis points out:

*“Sí porque yo he aprendido más inglés, pero no lo suficiente para entenderme bien cuando nosotros llegamos aquí [a Virginia] bueno todavía entendía mucho menos inglés”* [Yes, because I have learned more English, not enough to communicate perfectly, but when we arrived here (to Virginia) I understood a lot less].

### **Strategies for Language Use and Comprehension**

Parents use their language skills to comply with parental involvement requirements and get involved in their children's educational experiences. In all cases, the parents learned enough English to understand school documents, communicate at the work place, buy clothes and goods, and understand medical information. However, they all described they are far from a good level of language production in English. I made a distinction between learning for production and learning for comprehension to highlight the functional capabilities that these parents have in English (Valdés, 1996).

In terms of language production parents respond to the language challenge as novice learners of English. Parents use what they call *simple words* to communicate with school personnel and service providers. Parents welcome any kind of communication than not communicating at all. As novice learners parents begin learning the language in an item-by-item basis and then transit to longer syntactic units or phrases (Ringbom, 2007). Over time parents have to make the transition between understanding English in an item level to a more systemic approach. They are able to form more complex grammar structures like sentences, phrases, and a conversation.

In terms of written production, communication is the priority to fulfill. Parents focus on delivering the message rather than in grammar or English correctness. In Helena and Sandra's case communicating is the main force that drive them to send notes to the teacher regardless their grammar or spelling skills. Sandra and Helena have as a priority to convey and get their message across. They carefully organize their notes in a way it they believe it will be easier for the teachers to understand.

A key finding addresses the variety of strategies for comprehension that parents develop to understand written communication from the schools. Parents described they have a fairly accurate comprehension of text in English, since they receive a great deal of information from the schools in written form. To make sense of school documents parents engage in complex strategies to decode and respond to school demands. I identified four main strategies parents mentioned to decode school documents: 1) identify key words that relate to a specific action or event, i.e. fieldtrip; 2) identify words that are similar in Spanish (cognates); 3) build hypotheses and make inferences regarding the content of the documents; 4) confer meaning with their children, friends, or extended family members that can give them more information on the issue.

When parents learn specific words and strategies to decode meaning from school documents, it helps them to make decisions, take actions, and maintain communication with the school's personnel. Except for Mercedes who is illiterate in Spanish and English, all parents in the study mentioned that they identify key words from the documents. To comply with parental involvement requirements they know those words mean there is an action they have to take in response to the school documents. For example, all of them mentioned that when they see the words *field trip* they know the children will be out of school, *van de paseo* [they go on a trip], that they have to sign the document, send the permission slip back to school, and decide on a lunch option. This means that parents internalize the meaning of words and develop knowledge and understanding school practices in the constant interactions they have with the schools. By decoding the school documents, parents perform what Lave calls "understanding-in-practice" (Lave, 1993).

A significant difference was the number of strategies parents use to understand and accomplish different tasks. For example, Helena mentioned using the dictionary to find unknown

words, while Jose Luis did not. Bigelow and Tarone (2004) describe factors that may have an impact on the learning of English literacy: 1) the level of oral and written proficiency in the native language and in English (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009); 2) exposure to and experience with literacy in and outside of formal education settings such as the number of years of formal schooling in the home country (Grabe & Stoller, 2002); and 3) learner motivation (Dornyei, 2002; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Differences in all cases can be attributed to a combination of all these factors. For instance, all parents were motivated to learn English but factors like gender, household responsibilities, level of education, and literacy, made it impossible for them to dedicate the same amount of time to learn English and support their children's schooling experiences.

### **Conclusion**

In contrast to negative views that posit a lack of interest in immigrant communities the evidence from this study demonstrates the high value immigrant parents place on learning English. Also, it provides with evidence that learning English is of high priority for immigrant parents (Olsen, 2000; Waterman, 2006; Worthy, 2006). It underscores the use-value of English to understand parental involvement practices of immigrant parents and the different strategies parents use to decode information from the schools.

Delgado-Gaitan (1991) points out that lacking the sociocultural knowledge to become involved in schools results in isolation for parents, in particular those with limited English proficiency. This study provides evidence that resonates with Waterman's (2008) findings that learning English for immigrant parents is more effective when the goals are authentic to the students. Mothers in Waterman's study learned the skills and the language knowledge to communicate with the school personnel, making their parental involvement efforts more viable

and visible to the school. The success of Waterman's parental involvement curriculum was not only in helping mothers learn English. However, most valuable to them was learning the skills and the knowledge they needed to communicate effectively with the teachers, school personnel, and principal. Besides, they learned practices of involvement that resonate with those expected by the schools, making their parental involvement efforts more viable and visible to the school. The findings of my research can add to the development of curriculum for ESL classes that focus on goals that are authentic to the parents.

Another contribution of this research is that it adds to the knowledge of second language acquisition in immigrant communities. Bigelow & Tarone (2004) acknowledge that the majority of the research on second language acquisition about adult learners has been done on highly literate populations such as college students, undergraduates in foreign-language programs, graduate students in intensive English programs, or the like. "[R]esearchers rarely study adult and adolescent immigrant learners with very low literacy in any language" (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004, p. 689). My evidence converges with empirical studies that suggest the need to illustrate how learners improve their English proficiency in contextual situations (Modada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004). In the case of parental involvement this research provides an example of how Mexican immigrant parents engage in building an understanding about the school system by decoding and being active in their children's educational experiences in the United States. This research adds to our knowledge that even the minimum knowledge of English enables parents to comply with school requirements in the United States. However, acquiring the knowledge is not enough to make sense of the school system in the United States. For this reason, the following section focuses on describing how immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of parent-school interaction that may differ from their own experiences growing up (Reese, 2003).

### Standard Practices of Parental Involvement

*Q.2 How do immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parent interaction in the United States?*

The second research question focuses on how parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parent interaction in the United States. Mexican immigrant parents that move to the United States for economic reasons face a number of challenges when they arrive in their new home. Immigrant parents live under the shadow of language barriers, with limited knowledge or understanding of school policies and different expectations from schools concerning what counts as parental involvement (Olsen, 2000; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Waterman, 2008; Worthy, 2006). Additionally, economic immigrants face the burden of living with low income and a low socioeconomic status. Mexican parents with low income tend to have little schooling in their home country, entering into the low-wage/low skilled workforce in the United States (García Coll, et al., 2002). Taking these factors into account, the second research question focuses on understanding how Mexican parents deal with multiple family responsibilities and build an understanding of school practices to become involved in their children's education.

In this section, I describe how parents build upon their funds of knowledge to learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement in the United States. The section is organized as follows: first, I discuss differences in expectations between teachers and parents of Latino background. Second, I present the theoretical framework that underlines the discussion in terms of the concept of *accommodation*<sup>8</sup> (Olmedo, 2003). Third, I describe parent's strategies to make sense of school practices. Then, I present the cross case analysis and interpretation of findings

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<sup>8</sup> *Accommodation* frames the phenomena of parent's negotiations of their personal experiences and understanding of parental involvement practices and the values encountered in their new homeland (Olmedo, 2003).

based on the theoretical framework. Finally, I summarize the findings and present conclusions for this section.

### **Differences in Expectations**

In the literature, researchers have argued that there are differences between teachers' beliefs about what constitutes parental involvement and those of immigrant parents regarding their own role as educators (e.g. Elenes et al., 2001; Lawson, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). Mexican parents believe that their role as educators is to instill *respeto* [respect], and to teach good behavior and manners (Valdés, 2003). On the other hand, for teachers, supporting children's academic tasks and being physically present in the school is a symbol of parents' interest and involvement. In consequence, differences in teachers' and parents' expectations may create the impression, on the part of the teachers, that Mexican parents do not care about their children's education (Waterman, 2008).

Immigrant parents bring with them a personal understanding of norms, roles, values, ways of being, as well as expectations of appropriate practices of parental involvement (Reese, 2003). Differences in how immigrant parents involve themselves in their children's education might create the impression that they are not involved (Waterman, 2008). Several researchers have argued that immigrant parents who seem uninvolved in fact develop strategies of involvement that are not easy for teachers to recognize (Epstein & Sanders; Hoover-Dempsey, et. al., 2005; Lawson, 2001). Immigrant Latino parents' practices of involvement focus on teaching lessons to cope with life challenges for instance, dealing with anti-immigrant laws and xenophobia, in addition to facing the burdens of economic scarcity (Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). In many ways, parents have to *accommodate* to the cultural values

and life in the United States that in ways that considerably differ from their experiences back in Mexico.

### **Framing the Analysis**

To analyze the findings for the second research question, I used the notion of funds of knowledge to describe how parents navigate a school system unknown to them. I explain how parents use their funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 1992), particularly those that refer to the “body of knowledge” that immigrant parents use to make sense of parental involvement practices and to “preserve the household’s functioning and well-being” (Moll, et al., 2005, p. 72). I describe how parents learn about the school system and parental involvement practices by drawing from their funds of knowledge repertoire, which allows them to choose from many options those that better accommodate their needs. For instance, parents create meaning of standard cultural practices by comparing their own experiences with those of their children in the United States and relying on their own cultural wisdom to involve in their children’s education (Espinoza-Herold, 2007).

I use Olmedo’s (2003) concept of accommodation to frame the phenomena of parents’ negotiations of their personal understanding of parental involvement practices with the values they encounter in their new homeland. Accommodation refers to those strategies that Latino immigrant parents develop in order to adapt to their new life in the United States. In particular, I study the periodicity of the school practices and how they resonate with parents’ own school experiences back in Mexico. I also describe how parents *accommodate* into the mainstream society and create spaces where they can reaffirm and support their familial values.

### **Case by Case Analysis**

The findings in this section are organized by participant and separated into three main themes that portray the strategy that better represents each case. The themes in each section vary since each of the participants use different strategies. Findings presented in this section focus particularly on how parents receive information about school practices, routines, and/or programs and how they negotiate previous and new knowledge to develop parental involvement strategies.

#### **Helena**

##### **Receiving Information**

Helena relies on memos and written information the school sends to her home in order to learn important information about the school, including the activities and events in which her children are participating. “*Siempre te están mandado los folletitos, los papelitos con fecha, hora, y día, y si tu hijo está participando y siempre te mandan avisos de la escuela.*” [They are always sending you brochures, papers with the date, the time, and the day, and if your child is participating, they always send you notes from school.]

Helena particularly likes for the school to send the information about events in a timely manner. When Helena receives a document, she pays special attention to the date, the time, and the day the event will happen, keeping those that are important on one side of the refrigerator where they are easily visible. She explains that she does not go to the school often, but she participates by supporting her children in attending the school activities and events.

##### **Repetition and Experience**

Helena identifies school practices that she understands because they occur frequently and are part of the school routine. Repetition and experience help Helena build an understanding of

school practices. For instance, now that she has gone through the registration process for several years, she does not have problems with completing the papers and sending them back to school. Referring to the school registration process, Helena explains, "*Con cinco años, de que cada año es lo mismo, ya casi pues, ya casi como que me lo sé de memoria. Ya sé cual hoja arranco es para mí, ya se cual hoja es para ellos.* [With five years of the same every year, I almost, I almost know it by heart. I know which page to keep for me and which one is for them].

Establishing and learning routines is crucial to Helena. Routines help her understand the context of the interaction as well as the steps she has to follow to navigate the situation. For instance, Helena described the process of going to a restaurant or picking up her children early from school:

*Y entonces paso ahí a la escuela, paso a la oficina, sé que tengo que ir a la oficina, a firmar porque los recogí, a la hora, quien los recogió, y el motivo, y, o cuando voy a ir al salón por algo que tengo que arreglar con la maestra que por ejemplo de dinero del libro, o de fotos, o de algo, y tengo que llegar ahí, firmar, pedir un gafete, y me dan un gafete y voy. Pero haz de cuenta que todo, porque todo el mundo que me ve dirían que yo puedo hablar inglés y que yo me puedo manejar sola, pero ¡si supieran que no es así!  
¡Pero aún así me atrevo!*

So, I go to the school, I stop at the office, I know I have to go to the office to sign in because I picked them up; the time, who picked them up, and why, and, or, when I go to the classroom because I have to talk to the teacher about, for example, money for a book, or, for pictures, or something, I have to go there, sign, ask for a name tag and they give me a name tag. But imagine that everybody that would see me would believe I can speak

English that I can handle myself alone, but if they would know that it is not like that! But still I have the courage to do it!

Learning about the school culture has been a chronological process for Helena. For Helena, successes and failures in building a relationship or understanding the process are the most important source of learning about school practices. Helena notices that she has to learn new processes and procedures as her children advance in school. She builds on what she learned previously as her children advance from one grade to the next.

### **Learning at Home**

For Helena there are many challenges in understanding and supporting her children with learning at home but she makes an effort to help any way she can. At the beginning when the children attended kindergarten, it was easy for them, and easy for Helena to help them with their homework. The more they advanced in school, however, the more she found it difficult to help them. Not only does she need to know the subject matter, she has to learn English at the same time. Although she believes she does not learn as fast as they do, she challenges herself to learn as much as she can.

*Es que, como que yo como que he ido aprendiendo junto con ellos, no igual de rápido ni tampoco lo que ellos saben, pero a nivel de ellos, he ido que entender, he ido que entender con ellos igual, entonces, pasan a primero y lógico, que las tareas empiezan a cambiar, un poco más difícil, quizás para ellos no, quizás, para mí, y segundo más, y tercero más, hoy cuarto, ¡más!*

It is, it is like I have been learning at the same time, with them, not as fast, and not all they know, but at their level. I have had to understand, I have had to understand at the same time with them, so, when times passes, of course, homework assignments start to

change, a little bit more difficult, maybe not for them, but for me, and second grade more, and third grade more, and fourth grade, even more!

Supporting her children learning at home is a priority for Helena. When she receives information from the school Helena decides what school events to attend. Going physically to the school is harder for her because of the language barriers I discuss in the previous section. Because Helena is aware of the challenges of communicating with the school she makes every effort to support her children's learning at home activities.

### **The Service-Learning Students**

The service-learning students also play a role in helping Helena learn about practices of school-parent interaction; particularly those that were pre-service teachers. She finds the students to be an important support network to navigate the education system, and to understand the school culture. She mentioned particularly two students, Irene and David, who helped her with learning more about the school, both of them pre-service teachers majoring in Spanish and ESL.

Irene provided Helena with a homework dictionary *Diccionario de Tareas Para los Padres (Todos los Cursos K-10)* [Parent's Homework Dictionary (All grades K-10)]. The dictionary is a translation from an English version to help parents support learning at home. At the beginning, Helena was not sure about using the dictionary but later Irene insisted that it could help her understand homework assignments when Esmeralda cannot translate for her.

*Este libro me lo regaló Irene, una estudiante del programa, ella me dijo, yo creo que debes tener algo, para tu ayudar a tus niños a la escuela. Y le digo, sí porque, nunca es suficiente, siempre hace falta. Ta [sic] interesante, yo decía, yo creo que no, pero, pero sí, porque es un diccionario pero para tareas y para padres. Fíjate, que cuando necesito*

*traducir algo que de plano no entiendo y ellos tampoco saben, [me ayudo] con este:  
Diccionario de tareas para los padres.*

Irene gave me this book, one of the students from the [service-learning] program; she said “I think that you should have something to help your children at school.” And I told her, yes, because you never know, nothing is enough, it’s always necessary. It’s interesting, I would say, I think I should know, but, yes it is a dictionary for homework for parents. When I have to translate something that I cannot understand, and they [her children] do not understand either, I have the *Homework Dictionary for Parents*.

Besides Irene, David also helped Helena. In his case, she mentioned that her son Pedro was having problems with reading comprehension. David went to the school with Helena to interpret for her at a parent-teacher conference. When the teacher told her that Pedro was having problems with reading comprehension, David helped ease her anxiety. He contrasted his own experience with Pedro’s experience to explain to her that it was normal to have some problems at school. David also helped Helena to figure out information about after school programs for her children, so they can receive more attention from the school.

*Pedro, lo que lee, por lo menos no lo retenía, como que ahora a lo mejor ya, ha avanzado un poco, pero sí, podía leerte ahorita su libro de lectura de la escuela, y te lo leía y, te leía cada palabra y después de 15 minutos le decía yo que viniera para que te lo volviera a leer y ya tenía problemas, ya empezaba él a distraerse, es que ese niño, hasta con el lápiz se distrae, ey, le digo a la maestra, ¿porque él quiere estar jugando?, que dice, por lo regular los niños varones son así, y dice ella y mi hijo así era, dijo, mi hijo la primaria dijo, hasta cuarto año, mi niño, mi hijo varón, así era, y mi hija no. Y David me dijo que él también así era.*

Pedro, what he reads, at least he could not retain it, like right now he might be better. But yes, he could have been reading his reading book right now, and he would read it to you, he would read each work, and then after 15 minutes I would ask him to come and read it again and he would have problems, he would become distracted. It's because he would get distracted even with a pencil, I asked the teacher: Why does he only want to play? She told me that boys are like that, that her son was like that, until fourth grade, but her daughter was not like that. Also, David told me that he was like that too.

For Helena, having a reference of normal school behavior through her conversation with the teacher and David was crucial to ease her anxiety about Pedro's behavior at school. David helped Helena build an understanding of school practices and standard cultural norms that are acceptable in the host culture. With David's help Helena negotiated between her own understanding of acceptable behavior and what is accepted as good behavior at school.

### **Sandra**

#### **Several Sources of Information**

Sandra pointed out that besides the numerous documents the school constantly sends, she receives information about school practices from many different sources. Sandra mentioned the role of mass media in learning about parental involvement. According to Sandra there are several commercial campaigns on the Spanish-speaking channels that encourage parents to get involved at school.

*En los papeles que mandan de la escuela, en la televisión, en los programas que vemos en los canales de nosotros, todo esos, lo que es Univisión, Telemundo, yo pienso que todo el mundo ve, bueno la mayoría, vemos esos canales. Todos, siempre están hablando de eso, siempre, involúcrese en las escuelas de sus hijos. En los mismos promocionales, en*

*los anuncios desde, de esas televisoras mandan el anuncio: involúcrate en la escuela de tus hijos, pregunta, pide un traductor si no tienes.*

From the documents that they send you from school, on television, in the shows that we watch in our channels, all of that, at Univision, Telemundo, I think that everybody watches, well at least the majority, we all watch those channels. All of them, they are always talking about getting involved at your children's school. In the same promotional, in the commercials, from those television chains they send the information: get involved in your children's schools, ask questions, and ask for a translator if you don't have one.

Besides watching television, Sandra mentioned her church and the service-learning program as two other places where she learned information about the school. At church, she found out about the Refugee and Immigration Services Office that sent a translator when she went to court regarding the custody of her niece. Through the service-learning program she found information about the Mexican Consulate in the United States and services available for immigrants through that office.

*O sea eso es lo que a uno le enseñan y aparte mandan papeles y todo eso. Con la Sra. Kris información que nos daban también, o sea, uno recibe información de muchos lados, en la iglesia, en las escuelas, en dondequiera!*

I mean that is what one learns, and they also send papers and all that. With Sra. Kris information that they gave us too, I mean, one receives information from many places at church, at school, wherever!

Sandra builds an understanding of school practices by placing together all the information she receives from school, on television, at church, or at community programs like the service-learning program. For instance, Sandra pointed out that asking for interpreters at school was one

of the lessons she learned from the information she receives from the Spanish-speaking channels. Other sources of information came from being part of a community, a very important matter for Sandra.

### **Convivencia**

Being involved at church and at the monthly service-learning literacy meetings gave Sandra a place to share her experiences with other women in the community. Sandra described her relationship with the women in the service-learning program: [Me gustaba] *la verdad la convivencia con todas las mujeres. [To be honest, I liked the interaction with all the other women]*. The service-learning reflects the space described by Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) from La Familia [*The Family*] initiative. When Sandra participated in the service-learning meetings, attending gave her a sense of community and a place where she could develop community ties and have a moment for social interaction with other women going through the experience of having recently arrived in the United States (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004).

The women in the service-learning program shared their discoveries of how to accommodate to their new life in the United States. In the service-learning program, Sandra and the other women received information that was privileged for them. For instance, they received books and literacy materials for the children in English and in Spanish. They also had the opportunity to learn about programs for immigrant families. They received legal advice and other relevant information that helped them navigate their new life in the United States.

*Todo eso que Kris hacía por nosotras, el esfuerzo que hacía ella por enseñarnos, ya ves que llevaba gente especializada para hablar de esto, hablar de las licencias. Llevó una vez al Cónsul mexicano, también el Cónsul mexicano nos dio mucha información. O sea por información, no ha parado mucha gente se dedica a dar información.*

Everything that Kris would do for us, the effort she made for teaching, you know she would bring experts to talk about issues, to talk about a driving license. She brought the Mexican consulate, because the Consul also gave us a lot of information. I mean, for information, we haven't stopped; a lot of people give us information.

After Sandra stopped participating in the service-learning program, she found the church to be another place where she could build community ties. At church Sandra found *convivencia* where she shared with friends and other families a space of experiential sharing (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis (2004). *Pues sí de ahí son todos conocidos, y ahora ya no nos sentimos tan solo como antes (...) yo creo que Diosito por algo me mandó ahí.* [There everyone knows each other, we don't feel as lonely as before (...) I believe that God sent me there for a reason]. Similar to the experience in the service-learning program she attended a Spanish-speaking church where she shared her learning on standard cultural practices at school and in life in the United States overall.

### **Events and Routines**

To make sense of some of school practices Sandra compared what she learns about the school in the United States with her own schooling experiences in Mexico. For example, she mentioned that in Mexico, every two months, parents would go to the school and sign report cards. However, in the United States, the school sends the report cards with the children and parents have to sign them and return them to the school.

When Sandra compares her personal experiences when growing up with school practices in the United States, she contextualizes school practices that otherwise would be hard to understand. For instance, she drew a connection between going to the school and signing report cards, which was the practice back in Mexico, with attending parent-teacher conferences to

actually learn more about grades and her children's behavior. Sandra noted that in Mexico, when going to the school to sign the report cards, parents have the opportunity to talk with the teachers. In the United States, because the report cards come by mail or with the children, the schools utilize parent-teacher conferences to discuss the educational progress of the child. Sandra described the routine of making the appointment with the teacher and setting up a time for a parent-teacher conference in this way:

*Pero hay dos veces al año que ciertos días se dedican a pura conferencia de papás con hijos, si tú le dices, te mandan un papel, que horario usted prefiere la conferencia de su hijo, más bien porque el día te lo ponen tú nomás escoges el horario y es de doce y media a seis de la tarde.*

But there are two times a year that they do all day conference of parents with their children, if you say, they send you a paper, what time do you prefer the conference about your child, well actually only the day, because you only pick the time, and it is from twelve-thirty to six in the afternoon.

Sandra is familiar with events and school activities that have a sequence or a routine. She talked about the importance of the school calendar and how the school calendar guides her to know about important dates such as parent-teacher conferences, report cards, and any other activities or events throughout the year. She mentioned as well that the documents the school sends to her are periodic: parent-teacher conferences are twice a year; report cards come every six weeks; and each Wednesday, the teacher sends a stack of papers home.

*Mandan su reporte, su report card [sic], es que tienen un calendario ellos también, y cada día dicen que día no va a haber clases, que día van a hacer esto, que día, que actividades*

*van a tener en todo el año y que días son de report card que le llaman, las boletas que le llamamos nosotros, el reporte, y ya uno sabe que es, cada seis semanas.*

They send their report, their report card, it is because they have a calendar too, and every day they have all the days that they will not have classes, which days they are doing this and that, what activities they will have during the year and which day they are sending the report cards, their reports, and we know that it is, every six weeks.

To understand about school practices, routines, and events that are periodic was important for Sandra so she could make sense of school practices. She was able to draw from her experiences growing up to accommodate and make sense of those school practices that seem different from those back home, but which in essence are related to similar outcomes, like going to parent-teacher conferences to learn about her children's academic success and class behavior, and going to the school to sign the report cards. Sandra even pointed out about PTA meetings, but she felt her English was not good enough to become involved in the school that way.

### **Mercedes and Jose Luis**

#### **Missing Parent-Teacher Conferences**

The Hernandez parents receive written information about school activities and events. It is Jose Luis' duty to coordinate information about parent-teacher conferences and other responsibilities with their children's schooling, such as homework-related activities. However, with five children in school at different levels, it is difficult for the Hernandezes to keep up with parent-teacher conferences. During the time I was interviewing and visiting the family, Mercedes told me they missed two parent-teacher conferences for their younger children. They missed the first one because she forgot. Mercedes memorized the time of the appointment by remembering how many weeks before the conference since she does not know the days of the week in English

and consequently cannot use a calendar. She relies solely on her memory to manage the household's schedule: the children's, her work schedule, and Jose Luis' schedule. As it is easy to forget, Mercedes missed the parent-teacher conferences. After they rescheduled, they missed a second appointment because Jose Luis could not get out of work to drive her to the conference. Mercedes does not drive, so she has to rely on Jose Luis to take her everywhere. Since both Mercedes and Jose Luis work long hours in low wage/low skill jobs, every time they ask off of work to attend a conference places an extra economic burden on the family.

### **Coping with Teenage Pregnancy**

Mercedes and Jose Luis provided few details about frequent events or activities in which they engage at the school. At the end of the first interview, Jose Luis told me that their oldest daughter, Lilia, who was sixteen at the time of the interview, was pregnant. For Jose Luis and Mercedes it has been a very difficult time. *Estamos decepcionados [We are disappointed]*. During my time with Mercedes she constantly talked about how they were coping with Lilia's unexpected pregnancy. Mercedes plays a mediating role with Lilia and Jose Luis, Lilia and her boyfriend Efrain, and Lilia and the other children. Although Mercedes' illiteracy makes it difficult for her to remember dates and parent-teacher conferences, Mercedes engages in nontraditional practices of parental involvement by giving Lilia *consejos [advice]* (Elenes et al, 2001). "Several researchers have highlighted the power of *consejos* [sic] (advice, counsel) and other cultural narratives that bond parents with their children through sharing important experiences with each other" (Espinoza-Herold, 2007, p. 268). Similar to other mothers of Latino origin Mercedes use *consejos* (advice) to help Lilia stay focused and to avoid dropping out school because of her pregnancy. Mercedes explains:

*Y a veces yo me siento un poco mal, porque digo, bueno yo le digo esto, pero porque yo...le doy consejos, ¿verdad?[sic] y pues este muchacho le mete cosas a la cabeza y pues es tan... la verdad yo digo, se ha de sentir confundida ella...pues a quien le hago caso... y bueno yo me siento un poco mal...por ese lado... pero yo me siento a veces bien nomás porque... yo siento que... yo le digo las cosas bien... que mira esto, esto otro...*

Sometimes I feel bad... because, I mean, I would tell her this or that ... but because I gave her advice, you see? ...and... well this guy he insert things in her mind and he so... the truth is, she might get confused... who should I follow? ... and I feel bad for her... but other times I feel good, because, I feel that I tell her things right... consider this and that...

Mercedes and Jose Luis' struggle is for Lilia to finish high school after having the baby. Therefore, Mercedes gives *consejos* to Efrain, Lilia's boyfriend, to encourage him to support her daughter and for him to understand that is in Lilia's best interest to finish school. A way to protect Lilia from dropping out is to monitor her conversations and limit the time she spends talking on the phone with Efrain, when she has homework or school projects.

Since Mercedes does not read or write, she places great importance on her children's education (Lopez, 2001). Her dreams for Lilia are for her to complete high school so she can access better job opportunities. Mercedes encourages Lilia and her other children to finish school. In a recent conversation after Lilia had the baby Mercedes reported that she has kept Lilia in school. Lilia had a teacher from the school to keep up with her classes.

To deal with Lilia's pregnancy, Mercedes also looked for a community of mothers dealing with the same issue. At church Mercedes found a place to build community ties and have a time for sharing the experience of her teenage daughter (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004).

Specifically, Mercedes found a community of mothers dealing with similar issues like life in the United States and the problems that they encounter in the way, such as teen pregnancy. The experiences of other mothers shaped the way Mercedes proceeded in the matter of Lilia and helped her cope with the emotional stress the pregnancy brought to her life (Elenes, et al., 2001). Mercedes recalled the experience of Marta, an eighteen year old girl who became pregnant before Lilia:

*Bueno que, esta Marta, ella, le habíamos visto en la iglesia bien, un día le echamos de ver como que se le veía pancita, pero no, no tomamos importancia, y de hecho ya, para los 15 años la vimos, la vimos ya bien gorda y nos enteramos que ella se iba a aliviar en la semana, y dijimos bueno...ya ella se alivió, y los papás de ella pues si estaban bien resentidos, enojados....*

Well, because this Marta, she, we saw her at church as well, one day we notices she had a belly, but we did not pay too much attention, in fact for the 15th birthday, we saw her very fat, and we found out that she was going to give birth in a week, we though well, that's fine ... she had the baby, and her parents they looked resentful, angry...

Mercedes relied on her community ties and the cultural narratives other women shared to bond with parents and her daughter and move forward from the pregnancy issue. She gave Lilia *consejos*) and heard the advice of older women who shared with her as well. Mothers are the first and lifelong teachers, since they shape with their experiences the memory of the community (Elenes, et al., 2001). For instance, Mercedes learned from Marta's grandmother and still listens to her as well.

*Dice la señora, la abuela, que es la mamá del papá de Marta, que le da consejos: "Mira hijo, es que ya la cosa esta así, mira hijos deberías ver ya por ellos, cásalos mejor".*

*Pero él está enojado, es que le dice a la mamá, es que a usted no le pasó esto. “Mira hijo gracias a Dios que no, todas mis hijas se casaron bien, ninguna me fracasó, pero que me hubieran fracasado, yo la hubiera apoyado.” Entonces le dice, lo dice porque no le pasó, pero si también está muy triste esa familia, bueno Marta ya tenía más añitos, tampoco tan grande, tenía 18 años, pero también se sintió la familia.*

The grandmother, who is the mother of Marta’s father, gives him advice: “My dear, things are like that, you should look after them, marry them.” But he is angry, so he tells him that she would not understand because she did not have the same experience. “Look, thank God that all my daughters married properly, none of them failed, but if they would have failed, I would have supported them.” So he would say to her mother that she says that because she did not have to deal with the same situation, but that is how it is, the family is also very sad, well Marta was a little bit older, not that old, she was eighteen, but the family also felt resentful.

In the previous quote Mercedes pointed out *consejos* that were pertinent to her and which she learned at church. Age in Mexican families is a value; younger generations appreciate and respect their elders’ advice, such as that given by Marta’s grandmother. “Elders accumulate wisdom and numerous years of labor for the benefit of the family, which is repaid by the respect given to them because of their age” (Espinoza-Herold, 2007, p. 268).

For Mercedes, going to church was an important outlet. As a result of their recent move to another part of town, Mercedes had to alter her work schedule. She now works weekends and missing church is a significant loss for her. Mercedes’ workplace was closed for remodeling, because of the move; she had to work on weekends and miss church. Mercedes was sad about the fact: *Me gusta ir a la iglesia, (...) y ya si voy a trabajar, voy a dejar de ir otra vez a la iglesia*

(...) *ahorita que yo trabaje, se me va a hacer más triste.* [I like going to church, (...) and if I go to work, I am going to miss church, (...) now that I am going back to work, it will be sad.]

### **Facing Racial and Interethnic Conflicts**

The Hernandez parents decided that for security purposes they would move to the house they were living in when I met them. Besides economic burdens and dealing with their daughter's teenage pregnancy, the Hernandez parents were concerned about their children's physical security. According to them, their oldest daughters, Lilia and Angelica, were victims of racial hazing in their old neighborhood. They were constantly harassed by two African-American girls on the school bus and at the trailer park where they used to live. To stop the hazing, the Hernandez parents went to the school and spoke with the teachers about the incidents, through her friend Maria. However, they were not able to prevent these types of incidents at the trailer park and they decided to move to a new house.

As any emerging community, in this case Latino, establishes new relationships with long time residents, the process unavoidably involves facing conflict (Villenas, 2007). For instance, Winders (2007) explains how the presence of people arriving from Latin America challenges the understanding of the southern identity, thus creating tensions between Latino newcomers and long-time residents of Tennessee. Winders (2008) explains: "Indeed, the arrival of Latin Americans, a population that fits uneasily within a black-white racial taxonomy, raises new questions about southern race relations and racial categories more broadly" (p. 252).

In fact, the relationships with the schools are also determined by the existing interethnic interactions already in place before Latino immigrants arrived, such as the dichotomies between White and Black (Hamman et al., 2002). Still, Latino newcomers arrive in new places where the anti-Latino sentiment is not deeply rooted, given the relatively new presence of Latinos

(Hamman et al., 2002). In this context, the relationship between the schools and the community are in constant flux (Villenas, 2007). In the Hernandez case the interracial incidents the children experienced can be considered one of the many possible examples of how interethnic relationships are developing in Southwest Virginia. In a study with parents in Los Angeles, Reese (2003) found out that parents protect their children in inner city neighborhoods by not allowing the children to attend sleeps-over, play in the streets, or participate in other types of events. In this case, to protect their children, the Hernandez parents have adapted by moving, believing that the children will be safer in the new neighborhood and will go to different schools. The Hernandez parents' decision to move was their way of adapting from a racially unwelcoming setting to a more tolerant one up to this point in time.

The wellbeing of their children was a priority for the Hernandez parents. They accommodated their living arrangements to possibly protect their children from the dangers they encountered in the neighborhood, the school, and in the street. For instance, on another occasion, their son Octavio also was physically endangered. He was crossing the field to go to practice when two other students held him to try to sell him marijuana. Octavio decided to report the incident. When the Hernandezes learned of the incident, they feared for his safety and the school actually assigned an officer to follow Octavio around school for a couple of days. The Hernandez parents felt the school did not contact them with the information since they learned about the incident through Octavio only. Security was of a high concern for the Hernandez parents since they do not have the opportunity to be vocal about the incidents at the school. The Hernandez parents face the reality of subsisting with little income, struggling to speak English, having non-citizen status (Reese, 2002) and fearing for the security of their children. Their parental involvement practices focus on their children's safety. Contrary to lacking interest for their

children, all their decisions were made thinking about their children's well being and about how to protect them from an environment that was hostile and unknown for them as immigrant parents.

The Hernandez parents' practices of involvement did not match any of the traditional middle-class expectations. They constantly missed appointments at school and did not give importance to report routines or common practices at their children's school. Still, they were very concerned and involved in their children's education, although their efforts focuses on Lilia's pregnancy and avoiding having her drop out of high school, as well as on their children's safety. Mercedes advised Lilia not to drop out of school and made every effort to support her academic success. She relied on *consejos* to advise Lilia during her pregnancy and found a community at church to help her cope with the issue. In order to assure the children's well being they accommodated by finding a new neighborhood and school that they felt was safer for the children.

### **Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

The second research question focuses on how parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parent interaction in the United States. I used the notion of funds of knowledge in order to describe how parents *accommodate* to their life in the United States as they face the multiple challenges of living in a new homeland. Parents have to fulfill school demands that might be different from those they knew when growing up back in Mexico. I have described how parents build an understanding of school practices in the United States. Following, I will discuss differences and similarities across cases and I will interpret the findings through the lenses of the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 2005). I

present a description of the main similarities and differences across cases, and then I discuss the interpretation of the findings and the main contributions of this research to the base knowledge.

### **Similarities Across Cases**

Findings show two main similarities across cases. A key finding of this research is how parents use their funds of knowledge to understand school practices and optimized their efforts to support their children's education. Parents attempt to accommodate to school demands and "maximize positive outcomes for themselves and their children" (Reese, 2002, p. 38). As Espinoza-Herold (2007) points out parents' use of funds of knowledge "becomes the nucleus of an affordance network" (p. 262) meaning that parents use their funds of knowledge in dynamic and variable contexts as many means of resources. The funds of knowledge that parents use to *accommodate* to school demands enables and gives them grater "access to the economic and social resources represented in formal, academic, education" (Espinoza-Herold, 2007, p. 262).

Parents draw from their funds of knowledge in a variety of ways and use them as resources to accommodate to school demands or to engage in their children's education in ways they feel are appropriate. For instance, repetition and experience was crucial for Helena to learn about practices and comply with school requirements. Helena maximized the information she received from previous years to build on and add to the schooling experience of her first daughter to support her other children and respond to school demands. Likewise, Sandra constantly brought back her experiences growing up to pair with those school practices that seemed similar to her. She built on her own experiences growing up to make sense of common school practices in the United States. Her previous funds of knowledge allowed Sandra to draw direct relationships with practices that otherwise would be out of context or difficult to understand. For example, Sandra paired parent-teacher conferences, which does not have a direct

equivalent back in Mexico with the practice back in Mexico of signing report cards every two months. For Sandra, both events had the same final purpose talking to the teacher to learn about her children's progress in school. Finally, Jose Luis and Mercedes' emphasis was on encouraging their children's academic success by supporting Lilia and their other children not to drop out of school. Since Mercedes does not read nor write in Spanish, her previous references to school were almost non-existent. In order to support her children, Mercedes drew from her cultural resources such as *consejos* to encourage them to achieve academic success (Lopez, 2001).

The second similarity was that parents seek for spaces of *convivencia* to build community ties and to understand the educational system in the United States. Sharing information and resources was crucial for parents. Finding places for *convivencia* enabled them to compare their experiences as newcomers to Southwest Virginia (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004). As newcomers, the spaces these parents created for *convivencia* helped them figure out the how-tos of life in the United States. For Helena, the service-learning program created a space for *convivencia* where she learned information about programs and services in the community. Furthermore, the service-learning students, mostly those that were student-teachers, shared with her relevant knowledge about school practices. The students in the program who were student-teachers were engaged in the school system and knew about school demands like homework or typical school behavior in the classroom. Similar to Helena, Sandra liked sharing with other women at the service-learning program. However, the further she got involved at her church, the less she could commit to the program. After moving, Sandra made the transition of having a space for *convivencia* in the service-learning program to having a community of parents to share experiences at her church. In the third case, Mercedes, like Sandra, found at church a community

of mothers dealing with similar issues, such her daughter's teenage pregnancy. The shared experience with other mothers in the community helped Mercedes cope with the emotional stress the pregnancy brought to her life (Elenes, et al., 2001). Mercedes draw from *consejos* and her funds of knowledge to support her daughter Lilia. Mercedes' main purpose was to help Lilia and her siblings to accomplish the educational dream Mercedes and Jose Luis have for them: to finish high school. "Mothers devote much of their time so such "teaching," utilizing dichos and consejos as guiding principles to inculcate and reinforce values such as resiliency and perseverance, expectations, hopes, and dreams" (Espinoza-Herold, 2007, p. 263). Because of her limited education, Mercedes' main resource to support her children's education consisted of guiding them and reinforcing the values of school by sharing with them her cultural knowledge.

### **Differences Across Cases**

Two main differences can be identified across case studies regarding how parents learn about standard cultural practices of school parent interaction in the United States. The first difference is how parents receive information about school practices. All parents reported that they receive information periodically from school materials and papers the teachers send every week. However, there are differences in how parents decode those materials, and how they react to receiving information from school. Awareness makes a difference in their parental involvement practices. For instance, Helena determined a particular space where she gathers all the information that comes from the school, particularly those events that require her presence or documents that requires her signature. Helena paid special attention to those routines she considered important like the annual process of registration where she decided on school buses and meals, or parent-teacher conferences. In the second case, Sandra was the only participant who mentioned the role of mass media, alternative programs, and information she received at

church to help her build an understanding of school practices. Sandra's involvement in looking for a translator was reinforced in television programs especially targeted for *Hispanos* [sic]. For Mercedes and Jose Luis, it was harder to keep up with those school practices that required going to the school. With tight working schedules, every time they have to go to the school for a parent-teacher conference or to pick up their children early created an extra economic burden.

The second difference highlighted the varied resources parents draw from their funds of knowledge to make sense of parental involvement practices or to support their children at school. In all three cases, parents chose from different repertoires such as institutional practices, material goods, or cultural capital as their funds of knowledge to accomplish their goals. For instance, Helena's priority was for her children to behave well in school, stay out of trouble, have good grades, and do their homework. She supported her children in every possible way to achieve those goals. Helena complemented her efforts to understand school homework with the cultural capital and knowledge of the service-learning students. Helena was opened to the students' suggestions for help, learning about homework and programs to support her children at school. In Sandra's case, her constant comparison with her previous experiences as a student back in Mexico built the basis of her understanding of school practices in the United States. Besides, Sandra's knowledge and attention to dates, periodical events, and important dates is consistent with her background as an administrative assistant. Sandra draws from her previous experiences and professional background to build an understanding of school practices and keep her involvement in her children's education. On the other hand, Mercedes, who had little schooling experience, uses her funds of knowledge along with community knowledge to support her children at school. Mercedes' network was limited in terms of previous schooling experiences; however, meeting people at church expanded her affordance network to community resources.

She listens to the intergenerational advice from Marta's grandmother to Marta's father, and then she herself gave *consejos* to Lilia. Besides, Jose Luis communicated with the school; Mercedes' role was to advise the children and to support their schooling experience. As researchers have pointed out, mothers are the first and lifelong teachers, shaping with their experiences the memory of the community (Elenes, et al., 2001; Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). Mercedes' practices of involvement helped her children to stay in school despite the multiple challenges they have to face.

The literature on parental involvement considered the important role cultural resources have in Latino practices of parental involvement. Parents enact their cultural capital to get involved in every way possible in their children's education. Thus, this research adds to the understanding of how, who, and what kind of resources parents use to engage and maintain what they consider to be their educational goal which may varied from family to family. All parents share their desire for their children to have academic success and they support them and share this desire among all among Mexican families.

### **Conclusion**

Differences in how immigrant parents understand norms, roles, values, and parental involvement practices may create the impression that they do not care about their children's education or that they are not involved (Reese, 2003; Waterman, 2008; Elenes et al., 2001; Lawson, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). The findings from this section demonstrate that parents use their funds of knowledge to *accommodate* to the values and norms of the place where they have established their new lives. A key finding is how parents relate the periodicity of the school practices with their own school experiences growing up back in Mexico. A commonality across cases is that parents make use of their cultural resources to

support the educational aspirations they have for their children (Lopez, 2001; Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Waterman, 2008). A main difference across cases is the relatively different network of resources parents draw from to get involved and support their children's at school.

### **Description of Experiences**

*Q. 3 How do Mexican immigrant parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?*

The third research question in this study focuses on how parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved in their children's schools. Every day immigrant parents face other challenges in addition to facing the burdens of economic scarcity. They have to deal with anti-migrant laws and xenophobia, in a society that accepts them as labor and economic resources, but that openly rejects their presence (Perez Carreon, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). In this section, I describe how parents cope with every day challenges and how they evaluate their experiences of raising their children in the United States, with special emphasis on their involvement with their children's schools. The section is organized as follows: first, I frame the discussion in the context of the schoolcentric notion of parental involvement. Second, I present the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge that frames parent's strategies to accommodate, resist, or challenge mainstream values. Third, I describe in each case how parents describe and evaluate their experiences of becoming involved in their children's schools. Next, I present a cross case analysis and interpretation of findings base on the theoretical framework. Finally, I summarize the findings and present conclusions for this section.

### ***Schoolcentric Notion of Parental Involvement***

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) stresses the use of parents as resources to create strategies of involvement. However, researchers have concluded that it is ultimately the school understands

of what is parental involvement that is more valuable (Lawson, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lightfoot, 2004; Perez Carreon, Drake & Calabrese Barton, 2005). Parental involvement is defined by the needs of the schools rather than as a collaborative assessment examining the needs of both teachers and parents. The school is placed at the center of the relationship, creating a *schoolcentric* (Lawson, 2003) notion of parental involvement.

In consequence, minority parents are excluded from the decision-making process, yet it is assumed that parents should create structured educational environments at home to support the school's mission (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lightfoot, 2004). Furthermore, a *schoolcentric* notion of parental involvement leads to the perception that minority parents constitute a problem that needs to be fixed, that they are uninterested in their children's education, or not even involved. Immigrant parents are perceived through a deficit notion, empty or lacking the social skills and knowledge to support their children at school (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lightfoot, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008). To avoid a schoolcentric notion of parental involvement, we need to investigate how immigrant parents make sense of their experiences and how they use them to promote their children's education.

In the literature researchers have documented how parents use their funds of knowledge as resources to negotiate "in the path to survival and well being" (Olmedo, 2003, p. 375). For instance, Villenas (2001) points out that Latina mothers place their traditional values and the education in their home countries as superior. The mothers in Villenas' study were constantly disenfranchised by service providers because of their socioeconomic background and literacy level, which constantly placed them as 'needing' parental and English skills. Villenas (2001) found that mothers situate, in the space of their narration, their traditional values and the education of their home countries as superior meaning that they have the social skills of

etiquette, loyalty to the family, and most importantly *respeto* (Valdés, 1996). Similar to Villenas' findings, parents in this research place themselves as active participants of their children's education and they constantly seek ways to be involved despite their limited English proficiency and understanding of school practices, to make sure their children achieve their academic goals.

### **Accommodation, Resistance, and Resilience**

To analyze the findings for the third research question, I use the notion of accommodation, resistance, and resilience (Olmedo, 2003; Trueba, 1999; Villenas 2001) to frame how parents describe their experiences of getting involved in their children's education in a school context unfamiliar to them. Immigrant parents have to raise their children in a language and culture different from their own. Parents have to adapt to the lifestyle of the country they chose as their new home, reacting to the adaptation process in different ways. Some try to assimilate to the mainstream society, whereas others learn about the new context while maintaining their values, customs, and heritage language (Olmedo, 2003). In this section, I describe how parents accommodate, resist, or become resilient in the process of learning about the school culture of their new home.

Parents develop different strategies to cope with life challenges. First, I use Olmedo's (2003) concepts of accommodation and resistance to exemplify how parents negotiate their cultural understandings with those of the mainstream society. The definition of accommodation is pertinent since parents "[learn] to live in the context of the majority culture while also negotiating multiple identities" (Olmedo, 2003, p. 375). Olmedo (2003) points out that accommodation can proceed without assimilation, but accommodation is in itself a form of resistance, "a way of carving out a space where Latino values and perspectives can be affirmed

or coexist with very different ones” (p. 377). Parents learn to negotiate their cultural values in contrast to those mainstream standards represented by the schools (Reese, 2002).

Second, I use Trueba’s (1999) definition of resilience to address immigrant parents’ ability to overcome the challenge of settling into their new lives in the United States, which most of the times is extenuating and a difficult matter. Trueba (1999) defines “resilience [as] the capacity of immigrants to withstand pain, to survive physically and psychologically in circumstances that require enormous physical stamina and determination (...) as well as the psychological flexibility they need to adapt to a different lifestyle in the absence of their familiar environment” (p. 157). Resilience, accommodation, and resistance form the core of immigrant parents’ experiences of involvement in their children’s schools. I argue that parents exercise their agency despite multiple challenges and by doing so they aim to achieve better educational futures for their children.

### **Case by Case Description of Experiences**

The findings in this section are organized by participant and broken down into three main themes that better portray the findings in each case. The themes in each section varied since each of the participants evaluate their experiences differently, for many different reasons. However, a common experience of fear and frustration is present in all three cases.

#### **Helena**

In his ethnographic research, Reese (2003) found that parents accommodate to their new life by incorporating both the experiences they bring from the home country and the new ways of living in their new environment. In this case, Helena considers it difficult to be involved in the schools as much as she would like. Helena started by comparing her own experience with her mother’s experiences back in Mexico. During our first conversation Helena mentioned that her

mother was a community organizer, something similar to a president of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). However, in the United States, Helena finds it difficult to actively participate in the school. She is aware that the PTA committees support school functions; but, her limited English proficiency restrains her from committing to organizing school activities.

*Cuando festivales en la escuela pues siempre están pidiendo ayuda, que los padres se involucren y ayuden y de verdad yo casi no ayudo por lo mismo porque yo me cohíbo, a mi me da un poco de pena por, por, más que por no poder hablar, por no poder entender algo que yo me quede con mi carota de: ¿what? ¿Qué? ¿Qué me dijeron? ¿Pues adónde acudo, a quién le digo, qué dijo?"*

When there are festivals at school, they are always asking for help, form parents to get involved, to help, I almost do not participate because of the same, I get shy, I get embarrassed from not being able to speak [English] well, for not being able to understand something, and I will be standing there with my big ole what face. What? What did they say? So who do I ask, what do they say?

Because of her limited English proficiency, fear and anxiety are a constant in Helena's descriptions about her interactions with the school. Helena channels her efforts to allow her children to participate in school activities and programs, as well as to supervising homework. Nonetheless, her participation is limited to attending parent-teacher conferences, and when possible, attending school events. Helena sees her presence at the school as a way to show the teachers she is present in her children's education, but going forward to volunteer or organize school functions represents a major challenge for her. Helena uses her knowledge of English to decode school documents and comply with school requirements, but attending school meetings was more than Helena could handle. As Worthy (2006) describes, there are pervasive

consequences in the lives of parents who cannot communicate in English. Similar to Worthy's findings, Helena asserts that learning English would considerably increase her quality of life in the United States. Not knowing English limits Helena from attending PTA meetings or volunteering at school events.

Despite the English challenge, Helena considers herself as highly involved. She compares herself with other Mexican mothers in the community who do not get involved in any of the activities sponsored by the school. For Helena, attending school festivals is a way to make herself visible to the teachers and the principal. "*Voy y participo y de hecho los maestros se dan cuenta que ahí estoy, de hecho el director me cae muy bien.*" [I go and participate, in fact the teachers realize that I am there, in fact I really like the principal].

### **Cultural Differences**

Helena tries to accommodate to the school culture by attending the events sponsored by the school. However, Helena feels that most activities are not interesting or fun for her. She compares social activities with their counterparts back in Mexico and finds a clear difference in the styles of socialization and interaction. For Helena cultural differences make it difficult to include herself in the activities hosted by the school.

*Tan simples que se me hacen también aquí, sus cosas, tan, tan simples (...) no tienen tanto entusiasmo como nosotros. Si, sus, sus, reuniones, y sus, sus, no sé, sus fiestas, su feria... ¿cómo se diría? Como sus festivales, así tan simples, tan... o a lo mejor yo lo siento así, porque no, quizás hasta porque ni entiendo. Pero si entiendo, nomas que se me hacen como aburridos, son tan aburridos.*

So simple, I feel like, so simple, not as enthusiastic as we are. Their meetings are so boring, their parties, and fairs... what would you call it? Their festivals, so simple...

maybe is only how I feel, because, I do not understand. Well I do understand, but I feel they are boring, their parties are so boring.

Similar to Resee's (2003) assertion that immigrant parents have to negotiate their understanding of educational values that contrast with the values of their homeland. Helena felt her experiences with getting involved significantly differ from her experiences growing up. Although she accommodates to attend events sponsored by the school, she does not feel included or that school events are relevant to her.

### **Fear, Frustration, and Some Hope**

Helena has made every attempt to communicate and stay involved in school activities. When I asked her what she would recommend to parents of Mexican origin to encourage them to be involved in their children's school, Helena suggested that parents overcome their fear and try to be visible and present in the school. *Si tú tratas, si tratas lo logras. (...) A mí aquí los maestros de la escuela de mis niños, ellos saben que mi inglés es muy poquito y ellos se dedican a mí.* [But if you try, if you try, you can make it. (...) Here, my children's teachers they know I speak very little English and they are dedicated to me.

Waterman (2006) asserts that it is clear the language barrier hinders parents from expressing their full interest and capacity to engage in their children's education. In her study with Latino mothers learning English with a curriculum that included parental involvement strategies, she found that parents' efforts remained invisible to teachers and administrators because of cultural differences and the language barrier. In Helena's case her presence at parent-teacher conferences and school functions were her strategy to make herself visible to the school. This way the teachers and the school principal would know that she was willing to collaborate and was in control of her children's education.

Evidence of Helena's success in communicating with the teacher was also provided by the fact that she found a caring teacher (Noddings, 1992) who supports her efforts. She appreciates the fact that the teacher makes an effort to understand her and that she makes her expectations clear. Still, there is some ambiguity in Helena's expectations in the relationship with the teacher. She acknowledges that her English is poor, but she expects the teachers to demonstrate their appreciation for her efforts.

*Yo quisiera poder hacer más pero insisto lo mismo, sí me da un poco de pena, que, que me vayan a preguntar y que yo me sienta como que me están rodeando. ¡Ay! ¿Qué me están diciendo? Pero quizás también decirles a los maestros que, a los maestros de tus hijos, que tú no hablas mucho inglés pero quieres tratar, y si ellos te aceptan así y quieren hablar contigo a como tú puedas, pues esa es una, esa es una buena idea. O como yo hago también que mando mis notitas, mis notas ahí todas breves, pero notas, bien que las entienden.*

I wish I could do more, but I insist, I feel embarrassed that they will ask me something, that I will feel insecure, oh, what are they saying? But maybe if you tell your children's teachers that you do not speak too much English but you want to try, and they accept you like that, and they want to talk with you, the way you can, well that is a good idea. Or like me, that I send my notes, little notes, briefs but they do understand.

Teachers' attitudes are essential to develop and maintain a good relationship between monolingual Spanish-speaking parents and schools. In the following case Sandra describes and evaluates her experiences of getting involved with her children's schools in a very different way due to her relationship with the ESL teacher.

### **Sandra**

Fear and anxiety were also present in Sandra's evaluation of her experiences communicating with the schools and becoming involved in school functions. Although Sandra has a clear understanding of the calendar, events, and activities that parents perform in the school, she mentioned she does not like going to the school. Sandra is afraid to volunteer at school events or attend PTA meetings because her English is not good enough to communicate with the teachers and other parents.

*No mucho por el mismo miedo, de que mi inglés no es nada bueno, y tengo miedo a no poderme comunicar, ni con las maestras, ni con los otros padres. Entonces evito eso, si me gusta que involucrarme en el aspecto de que cuando me hablan, de que si, el niño tiene que estar en este programa para el vocabulario y todo eso, o sea si me interesa.*

It's because of fear, because my English is not good, I'm afraid I won't be able to communicate with the teachers or other parents. So I avoid that. I like getting involved when they call to tell me, if my child needs to be in the vocabulary program and all that. I mean, I am interested.

Sandra considers her physical presence in the school to be limited. Nevertheless, she continually asserts that she is involved in her children's education in all possible ways and that she cares about her children's schooling. She makes an effort to attend parent-teacher conferences and events organized by the school. She makes herself present in the school, mainly for the purpose of making the school administration aware that she is interested in her children's education. For Sandra, being visible in the school is a way for her to inform the teachers that she cares about her children's education (Waterman, 2006).

### Limited Collaboration with the Teacher

Despite her efforts, Sandra feels frustration because the language barrier limits the ways she can collaborate with the teachers. Similar to Helena, Sandra hopes that her presence in the school demonstrates her willingness to collaborate with the teacher. Sandra's example confirms Waterman's (2006) observations that immigrant parents not only are interested in their children's education but are eager to find ways to collaborate with school teachers.

*Que el mismo maestro o maestra vea el interés que tiene uno, porque el bien es para nuestros hijos. Entonces es que uno quiera, sí a mí también me hace falta más involucrarme nomas que me da [miedo]. Sí es importante eso, también que el maestro vea, vea, que aunque nosotros no entendamos muchas veces inglés, hay comunicación. También, parte de los maestros que no tengan miedo de comunicarse con nosotros... pues.*

I want the teacher to know that I am interested, because it benefits our children. It's about wanting [to participate]. I know I need to get more involved, but I am [scared]. That is important too, that the teacher knows that even though a lot of times we don't understand English, there is communication. Also, that will mean that the teachers aren't scared to communicate with us.

Sandra accommodates to school demands by making herself visible to the teacher and supporting her children with homework and school activities. Sandra gives great emphasis to supporting her children with homework assignments although the vocabulary is difficult for her to understand. For Sandra, the more advanced her children are in their classes the harder it is for her to support them with their homework. She tries to help them as much as she can by herself,

but the English vocabulary required to understanding social sciences, history, or other concepts are advanced for her level of English proficiency.

Similar to the linguistic challenges with homework, the language barrier limits Sandra from becoming more active in school functions. For instance, despite her desire for being more involved in the school she considers her physical presence at school to be limited. Also, the language barrier hinders her from getting involved in the PTA committee. Sandra knows parents organize school events at PTA meetings and that it would be beneficial for her to participate, although she fears that because of the language barrier she would not be able to discuss issues. Sandra's English proficiency is limited to communicating with and asks simple questions of the teachers. On her own words:

*Sé lo básico. Puedo preguntarle algo a la maestra pero nada más, pero ahí [a las reuniones de PTA] se trata de estar hablando, diciendo, discutiendo, entonces ahí si (se ríe) ya no me siento muy capaz [de comprender inglés].*

I know the basics. I can ask the teacher something but nothing more, but there [at the PTA meetings], it's about talking, telling, discussing, so I don't feel capable of doing that [understanding English].

### **Double Effort**

According to Sandra, being an immigrant in the United States forces parents to make a *double effort* to support their children's schooling. *Porque estamos en un país que no es nuestro y tenemos que echarle el doble de ganas, verdad. [Because we are in a country that it is not our own, we have to make a double effort.]* Overall, Sandra feels grateful that her children have better educational opportunities in the United States than they would have back in Mexico. She likes the fact that the school worries about each of her children and pays attention to their

language needs. According to Sandra, the class sizes are small, and her children have a special ESL teacher to support their English language development. Yet, constant calls from the teachers about what she calls minor problems make her feel overwhelmed.

*Sí, a veces hasta digo, ¡ay! que, se me hace demasiado exagerado, para mí como uno tiene su educación. A veces hasta me desespero que digo ¡ay! pues que, es demasiada atención la que le dan, demasiada, o sea todo, y habla una maestra, habla otra y o sea son, es demasiada atención, y está bien, pero muchos papás también son así, demasiadas atenciones, o sea, como que se dedican más con ellos.*

Sometimes I even say good grief! She's making too much out of nothing like, well, in my opinion, as I understand. Sometimes, I get desperate, I think, it is too much attention, too much. I mean everything, one teacher calls, then the other, they are... I mean is too much attention. It is fine, but other parents are the same, too much attention, I mean, the way they focus so much attention on them [on the children].

Sandra's experience parallels Villenas' (2001) study in North Carolina. Villenas (2001) explains how well intentioned service providers and school personnel described Latina mothers within the discourse of minority and poverty, looking at them through the deficit model frame, or what Villenas called *benevolent racism*. As a graduate student in the service-learning class I met the ESL teacher working in Sandra's county. Ms. Robinson was a middle-class, middle-aged, White woman taking classes for her licensure. In one occasion I remember running into Ms. Robinson at a local restaurant recognized for cooking traditional country meals. She commented how nice it was to have Latinos that could visit the local places. In that moment I felt she placed me as the other, similar to the Mexican and Honduran immigrants that recently arrived in the area looking for better economic opportunities. Her comment triggered many thoughts about

how unknowledgeable she was regarding socioeconomic differences among Latinos and the economic hardships of the children she serves. When talking about how much attention her children receive, Sandra constantly asserted that she makes every effort to stay involved but that she has serious constraints because of the language barrier.

She explained that her daughter Karen was of great support to her; not like other children who would be problematic and disrespectful to their parents. She compared her daughter's behavior with some children she knows from a White middle-class background. Sandra's comment's and comparisons between *American* [sic] teenagers and her daughter's behaviors seemed similar to the Latina mothers in North Carolina (Villenas, 2001). The mothers described in Villenas' (2001) research situate their traditional values and education as superior to the White-middle class norms they consider mainstream values. Sandra also believes that her social skills of etiquette, loyalty to the family and mostly important *respeto* (Valdés, 1996) were superior. Sandra felt proud to have a family with strong moral values.

### **Mercedes and Jose Luis**

Mercedes and Jose Luis mentioned frustration as a constant in their interactions with school teachers and when trying to understand the school system in the United States. Jose Luis described how many times he has gone by himself to parent-teacher conferences and how hard it is for him to understand the teachers. When I served as their interpreter, Jose Luis and Mercedes were grateful that I accompanied them. They considered it a successful meeting because they could communicate better with the teachers better and more accurately. Mercedes and Jose Luis not only have problems at parent-teacher conferences but also with understanding report cards. In one visit to the household, the children shared their report cards with Jose Luis and with me. While I read the cards, I asked the children questions to understand why they received an A or a

B on an assignment. Then Jose Luis pointed out that he felt frustrated by the fact that he cannot read the report card. Many times he does not fully understand to what items the grades refer to. In fact, I learned firsthand that in looking over the report cards, the final grade was not immediately obvious nor it apparent how the grades had been assigned. Furthermore, since Jose Luis has the responsibility of dealing with school issues, the children come to him and ask him about homework. Jose Luis explained that he can provide little help to the children. He mentioned that he can read, write, and do some basic math, but when the school assignments are difficult, he is of little help. Finding ways to help the children with homework was one more responsibility that he had to assume. That, in addition to caring for the household, was overwhelming.

### **How Can We Support Our Children?**

Jose Luis and Mercedes not only had to deal with the language barrier, but their low level of education made it difficult for them to support their children with school assignments. Jose Luis and Mercedes' case illustrates Waterman's (2006) assertion that the language barrier is not the only thing that can hinder parents' efforts in completing assignments. Other circumstances like confusing assignments or unclear expectations make it difficult for parents to support their children's school work. In this case, Mercedes was not involved at all with homework and Jose Luis had a very busy schedule with limited time to support the children. Even if the homework had been provided in Spanish, it would have been almost impossible for them to help the children.

*Ayer, me estaba comentando la más grande y ella me dice, fíjate que tengo un proyecto sobre Hernán Cortés, ¿quién era Hernán Cortés? Le digo, no pues le digo, Hernán Cortés sí lo escuché, pero yo no sé que hizo Hernán Cortés (se ríe). No, dice es que tengo*

*que investigar sobre Hernán Cortés, y sobre otros de Perú, y otras personas no sé de dónde, y como le digo yo, aparte mis problemas que yo tengo, pues no.*

Yesterday, the oldest was telling me, look I have a project about Hernan Cortes, who was Hernan Cortes? I told her, well, Hernan Cortes, I heard about it but I don't know what he did. She says, I have to do research about Hernan Cortes, and other people from Peru, and other people from I don't know where, so I tell her, besides all the problems I have, well no.

When teachers have the expectation that homework should extend student learning they assume that the parents possess the educational and cultural capital to make sure the children can finish any given task (Waterman, 2006). However, it is clear in Jose Luis and Mercedes' case that the parents' level of education and their work schedules can hinder their possibilities for supporting their children. Jose Luis and Mercedes were willing to support their children's education, but the type of collaboration they could provide was more related to making sure the children could complete homework.

A way to support her children was by engaging in dialogue with school teachers to collaborate with them regarding the children's academic success. For instance, during our visit to the school to attend a parent-teacher conference for Octavio, the English teacher mentioned that he needed to read twenty minutes per day. Given Octavio's poor performance in the class, the teacher asked me to tell Jose Luis and Mercedes they needed to reinforce the reading rule, which is reading for twenty minutes every day. Mercedes immediately explained that in fact Octavio sits down with a book every day, and that she observed him trying to read for twenty minutes. This conversation was enlightening for the reading teacher since what she considered appropriate for helping Octavio's reading problem was not helping him. She also realized she had the

parents' support to reinforce the rules. As a result, during the parent-teacher conference Jose Luis and Mercedes learned how they could make changes to support Octavio and the teacher changed her strategy to help him with his reading problem. Jose Luis and Mercedes' dialogue with the teacher enabled collaboration between them that was not in place before.

### **Resilience**

Mercedes has a strong commitment to her children's educational success. In line with researchers who describe the high value Latino parents give to their children's education (Delgado Gaitan, 1987; Lawson, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Villenas, 2001), Mercedes places great importance on education. Mercedes understands firsthand how difficult is to get by without knowing how to read and write. She feels dependant on having to ask Jose Luis or the children to read for her, and is scared when she has to leave the house by herself. Besides, she cannot support the children with any homework or school activities.

*Pero lo más importante que es el estudio y sí le pienso a veces porque digo yo, es bien difícil porque si uno le dicen tal calle, vete por tal calle pues uno no va a saber por qué no, si están las letras y todo uno no va a saber, bueno al menos yo y es bien difícil. (...) Yo siempre estoy atendida a él, con las niñas.*

The most important thing is to study, because sometimes I think, I say, because it is very difficult when someone tells me go to this street, go to the other street, you will not know why, and the letters are there, and you don't know, well at least for me, it is very difficult. I'm always depending on him, on the girls.

Mercedes feels frustrated because of the limits the language barrier places in her life. Mercedes frustration with English adds to her own lack of literacy. Hardship of life, dealing with multiple responsibilities, plus the frustration of living in a country where language and culture

were different for her translated in Mercedes constant headaches, insomnia, and nightmares.

When I visited Mercedes she constantly talks about how she cannot sleep well and how much her head hurts. *Fuimos a, a Winston-Salem, porque ella decía que iba a buscar una persona que le sobara su espalda, este, porque le dolía mucho la cabeza.* [We went to Winston Salem to look for someone that could give her a massage, because she had too many headaches].

Mercedes is a good example of the hardships immigrant mothers encounter and the great effort and resilience with which they face challenges. To be able to provide for the household and remain at work, Mercedes taught herself how to read the orders in the fast food restaurant where she works. Mercedes learned enough English to follow directions so she can keep her job and support the household.

*No sé qué fue, que paso pero yo aprendí, a pesar de que yo no sé leer, no sé, no sé cómo fue que aprendí. Yo en la computadora aparece todo lo que se pide y yo lo sé hacer, y yo no entiendo, no sé leer y lo aprendí.*

I don't know what it was, what happened, but I learned despite not knowing how to read, I don't know how I learned. On the computer everything they ask for shows up, and I know what to do, but I don't understand it. I don't know how to read and I learned.

Mercedes' resilience and strength in facing life's challenges helped her cope with the anxieties of living in a country where the language is different from her own. In the same way she has helped her children deal with life challenges. For Mercedes, education is extremely important and in the same way she teaches her children to value their educational opportunities.

### **Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

The third research question focuses on how parents describe their experiences of getting involved in their children's education in the United States. I used the notion of funds of

knowledge to describe how parents *accommodate* to their life in the United States. Furthermore, parents exercise great resilience to overcome challenges and remain hopeful about the educational futures of their children. In this section, I will discuss a general impression of their descriptions of experiences. Parents in the study also expressed feelings of frustration and fear about their relationships with the schools. I will discuss how parents cope with the anxiety that resulted from their interaction with schools, and similarities and differences across cases. Finally, I discuss the interpretation of the findings and the main contributions of this research to existing knowledge in the field.

### **Description of Experiences**

In this section, I discuss how parents describe and evaluate their experiences of becoming involved in their children's education in a culture and language different from their own. In all cases, parents expressed that fear and frustration is their main feelings when interacting with the schools. All parents described difficulties in understanding the teachers or feelings of being limited in their opportunities to get more involved in the schools. All the parents felt that the language barrier significantly hinders their interactions with the school.

Frustration was at the core of their evaluation, but parents have different reasons for this feeling. For instance, Helena accommodates to school demands helping their children with homework and attending parent-teacher conferences and festivals. However, given her mother's experience as a community organizer she felt she could not be involved in the same way. Furthermore, cultural differences and her perception of school personnel's expectations make it difficult for Helena to fully enjoy school activities and to have a purpose to become more involved. Similar to Helena, Sandra accommodates by supporting her children with school work. Nevertheless, as they progress, it has become clear that getting involved with school activities is

harder all the time, which was a great source of frustration for Sandra. In Jose Luis case, his English proficiency level and the amount of time available to spend with their children is limited. Going to parent-teacher conferences adds a burden to the family since Jose Luis and Mercedes both have to ask for a day off at work. Jose Luis feels frustrated helping with the children with homework; he is overwhelmed with his responsibilities of providing for the household along with having to deal with schoolwork. For Mercedes felt limited not only because of the language barrier but also because of her lack of literacy. Mercedes felt dependent on her husband and children to get around town and to interact with service providers, and the school.

A key finding was that despite their feelings of anxiety all parents hope to be involved in their children's schooling experience in the United States. All parents reported being involved in their children's education. Parents' efforts were focus on supporting them with homework, either sitting with them to complete assignments or making sure they have a place and time to do them. Similar to Waterman's (2006) findings the data contested assumptions that it is only the interest and responsibility of the school to promote parental involvement in immigrant families. Contrary to this assumption, "Mexican immigrant parents bring hope for, and are committed to [parent-school partnerships]" (Waterman, 2006, p.154).

An important difference in the three cases is the parents' efforts to become visible to the school staff or at least to the school teachers. Helena and Sandra demonstrate their interest by attending parent-teacher conferences, being part school events, and being present at the school when they have an opportunity. However, Jose Luis and Mercedes' efforts were difficult for the teacher to recognize since they constantly miss conferences and school events. It was clear that sorting the cultural and language differences, and becoming visible to the school staff depended

on individual efforts. As a result, the experiences, capacities, values, and involvement of parents like Jose Luis and Mercedes may remain invisible.

Collaboration is possible when parents and teachers create effective ways to extend parent's possibilities and efforts of involvement. For instance, when I served as their interpreter at the parent-teacher conference with Octavio's teachers, the communication was more effective for both sides. Furthermore, Helena and Sandra mentioned that they have knowledge about PTA meetings and volunteer opportunities in the school. Nonetheless, neither Helena nor Sandra felt comfortable enough with their English language skills to become involved in school committees or PTA meetings where decisions were made. A challenge for educators will be to bridge or understand the language barriers that hinder parents like Helena and Sandra from participating in the decision-making process in schools.

Furthermore, all parents reach a certain level where they could use their knowledge of English to help their children with school assignments. It was hard for immigrant parents fulfill the role of parents as educational partners. Their efforts were devoted to provide their children, encourage them to take advantage of their educational opportunities, and to comply with school requirements in their best capacity. Parents' views on parental involvement practices were different from those expected by the schools. Still they hope and were committed to develop parent-school relationships but those would have to take a different shape from what is considered to be parental involvement.

## **Conclusion**

In order to fulfill their dream parents have to accommodate to the challenges of living a life in a school culture and language different from the one used at home. Parents' experiences educating their children in the United States were hard to say less. Challenges varied from

cultural difference to the language barrier. Still parents use their funds of knowledge to understand school practices and to accommodate to school expectation. Parents work hard with strong resilience to face the challenges they experience in the new place.

### **Summary of Findings**

In this chapter, I presented the findings regarding how immigrant parents communicate with the schools and learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement; and how they describe their experiences getting involved in their children's education in a culture and a language different from their own. I have used the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge to understand how parents use their cultural capital to make sense of the school system in the United States. I discussed two main strategies that parents use to communicate with the school: 1) using interpreters as affordance networks for communication, and 2) using their own knowledge of English to take actions and comply with school requirements. Data revealed that, contrary to common assumptions, parents do not prefer children as their first option for interpreting functions.

In terms of learning about standard cultural practices of parental involvement the data show that parents accommodate to school demands using different strategies and resources from their funds of knowledge. Parents learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement and at the same time they support their children's education; in this process parents rely on their own cultural repertoires. Besides, parents seek for places where they can develop community ties and spaces for *convivencia* in order to learn about the how-tos of life in the United States.

Finally, findings demonstrate that parents feel frustration and anxiety about their relationship with the schools, since they are facing with great resilience the every life challenges of living in a culture and language different from their own. In the next chapter, I synthesize the

main findings of this study and discuss the implications of the presented findings for policy in the context of the NCLB act, teacher preparation programs, and local school or service programs.

## Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications and Future Research

The overarching goal of this dissertation was to deconstruct the complexities in the relationship between Mexican immigrant parents and their children's schools in the context of parental involvement. In this chapter I summarize the main findings, discuss their implications, and present questions for future research. First, I recall the purpose of this study, its significance, the overarching objective and the research questions since the inferences in this chapter reflect the particular context of the participants as seen through the filter of these research questions. Second, I present each research question followed by a discussion of the main findings. Third, I answer the overarching objective of the study through the analysis of the interconnections of findings across research questions. Forth, I open the discussion to reconsider parental involvement to include the contextual differences and expectations of immigrant parents. Fifth, I discuss the implication of this research for teaching preparation programs, local school or service programs, and parental involvement in the context of the NCLB. Finally, I draft questions to be addressed in future research to further explore the intricate process by which immigrant parents re-learn the parental script in the U.S. school system.

### **Purpose of the Research**

In this dissertation, I address the need to deconstruct the complexities in the relationship between Mexican immigrant parents and their children's schools, which relates to the academic success of Latino children. Researchers have consistently agreed that parental involvement leads to student achievement, better school attendance, and a reduction in dropout rates (Driessen Smit, & Slegers, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2007; Viramontez Anguiano, 2004). Parental involvement benefits students regardless of the economic, racial, ethnic, or cultural background of the family (Epstein & Sanders 2000; Inger, 1993;

Jeynes, 2003; Tinkler, 2002). In consequence, parental involvement seems to be one important factor to help Latino students in closing the achievement gap. However, the relationship between immigrant Latino parents and the school system possesses complexities that need to be examined.

My aim through this study was twofold: to contribute to a growing, but still limited understanding of how Mexican immigrant parents with low income develop an understanding of the school system in the United States; and to add to the developing theories on parental involvement in a multicultural context. The first purpose of this research was to bring forward the voices of Mexican immigrant parents often inaudible in the research regarding parental involvement. The study was situated in the context of Southwest Virginia.

The study examines the experiences of three Mexican immigrant mothers and one father. Helena was an active participant of a service-learning program hosted by a medium-sized Land Grant University. Sandra also attended the program only for some time. Finally, the Hernandez parents, Mercedes and Jose Luis, were randomly selected in the community and did not participate in the service-learning program at any time. The study relied mainly upon semi-structure interviews with the participants in the research, along with observations and field notes. I spent more than 20 hours with each family during the fall semester of 2009, both, attending social and school-related events with them. The conclusions from this study provide insight as to how Mexican immigrant parents with low income develop an understanding of the school system in the United States.

However, I am aware that immigrant parents with more resources or in a different location may have different approaches to understanding the school system. Single mothers might use different strategies as well. Furthermore, a study focusing on families with children in

either side of the border might reveal different strategies than those described in this study.

While I acknowledge that the conclusions drawn in this study possess limitations for extrapolation, I envision that the present findings and implications can guide further understanding, research, and changes in programs to service this sector of the population.

In order to reach the goals of this study, I framed my research around the following overarching objective and research questions.

Overarching objective:

How do Mexican immigrant parents, with low income make sense of the school system in the United States?

Research Questions:

1. What communication channels are available between Mexican parents and their children's schools?
2. How do immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parents interaction in the United States?
3. How do Mexican immigrant parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?

### **Main Research Findings**

*Question 1: What communication channels are available between Mexican parents and their children's schools?*

Parents developed two main strategies for communicating and maintaining contact with the school: 1) the use of interpreters to communicate with the school; and 2) the use of their knowledge of English to become involved with their children's education.

In regard to the first finding, evidence demonstrates that interpreters are essential for parents to fulfill the goal of communication with the school and to bridge the gap between themselves and teachers and administrators. Parents engage in *affordance networks*<sup>9</sup> in order to achieve their goal of communicating and maintaining their connection with the schools. Findings indicate that parents choose different people from their affordance network to better meet the parent's needs and solve communication problems in a contextual setting. I suggest that the parents' process for choosing an interpreter is based on the following factors: the situation or context, the availability and disposition of the interpreter, the interpreter's English proficiency and competence in the particular context, and the level of trust between parents and interpreters. Moreover, parents' *affordance networks* evolve through time, providing different interpreting options as well.

The data reflects that parents have different preferences when selecting interpreters and preferences are guided by the need for action and communication. "Affordance is a possibility for action by an individual" (Barab & Roth, 2006, p. 7). Therefore, when parents engage in an affordance network they open the possibility for action, which in this context refers to parental involvement activities. Parents select resources in the network based on the particular situation that requires an action and the capabilities of the interpreter. For instance, Helena prefers to use the service-learning students because they share with her their cultural capital and their understanding of the school system and life in the United States. On other hand, Sandra prefers to use the interpreters provided by the school. Although, Sandra was part of the service learning program for some time, she considered the student's Spanish language skills to be limited. Moreover, interpreters in the school provided her with better information about school

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<sup>9</sup> "An affordance network is the collection of facts, concepts, tools, methods, practices, agendas, commitments, and even people, taken with respect to an individual, that are distributed across time and space and are viewed as necessary for the satisfaction of particular goal sets" (Barab & Roth, 2006, p. 5).

requirements specific to her case. Since Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez reported they know limited English, the quality of Spanish/English interpreting in terms of accuracy is of high importance to them. The Hernandezes preferred interpreters that could explain clearly the ideas in Spanish to them. At the same time the Hernandezes looked for someone they could trust in transmitting their words and meaning correctly in English. Due to these reasons the Hernandezes preferred native Spanish speakers as interpreters in the interaction with the school.

This study suggest that given the family setting, children are the most convenient interpreting resource available to the parents; yet the larger the parents' affordance network, the less the parents reliance on children as interpreters. Barab and Roth (2006) argue that when an individual has to fulfill a particular goal he/she selects resources inside the network in order to accomplish that goal. The children's competence in English places them as part of the affordance network for their parents. However, children are not always the first choice for parents to accomplish certain interpreting tasks contrary to common assumptions about immigrant parents. For example, in Mercedes and Jose Luis case their children are not fully proficient to express concepts in Spanish and their low English proficiency precludes them from guessing what their children want to convey. Parents prefer more fluent and knowledgeable interpreters.

The second strategy focuses on how parents use their knowledge of English to become involved with their children's education. Findings suggest that despite parent's limited English proficiency, they make an effort to comply with parental involvement duties with the school. Helena, Sandra, and Jose Luis use their knowledge of the English to make sense of school documents, communicate in response, or comply with school requirements. Furthermore, my data provides evidence that immigrant parents learn English in the context of their children's

school experience, where words have the content and the value that help them comply with parental involvement requirements.

Parents use English for comprehension and production to help them understand school documents or communicate with the school. Both forms of language use are instrumental in helping parents to understand school documents or to communicate with the school. In terms of language production parents respond to the language challenge as novice learners of English. Parents use what they call *simple words* to communicate with school personnel, teachers, health providers, and to navigate in other situations where parents cannot make use of interpreters. In all three case studies, parents welcome any kind of communication rather than having no communication at all. As novice learners parents begin learning the language in an item-by-item basis and then they transit to longer syntactic units or phrases (Ringbom, 2007). Over time parents have to make the transition between understanding English in an item level to a more systemic approach. When this occurs, parents are able to form more complex grammar structures like sentences, phrases, and a conversation.

In terms of written production, communicating the message is the key priority to fulfill. Parents focus on delivering the message rather than on grammar or English correctness. In Helena and Sandra's case communicating is the main force that drive them to send notes to the teacher regardless their grammar or spelling skills. Sandra and Helena have as a priority to get their message across in order to respond a message or to take an action. They carefully organize their notes in a way that they believe, will be easier for the teachers to understand.

A key outcome of this research question is that it unveiled the variety of strategies for comprehension that parents develop to understand written communication from the schools. This is a critical finding, where parents described the steps and strategies they follow to decode

messages in English, something that I have not seen reported before in the literature. Parents describe that they have a fairly accurate comprehension of texts in English, since they receive a large amount of information from the schools in written form. In order to make sense of school documents parents engage in complex strategies to decode and respond to school messages. I identified the following main strategies parents mentioned to decode school documents: 1) identify key words that relate to a specific action or event, i.e. fieldtrip; 2) identify words that are similar in Spanish (cognates); 3) build hypotheses and make inferences regarding the content of the documents; 4) confer with their children, friends, or extended family members to corroborate meaning. Moreover, parents also identify and look for organization of information items in the format of the school documents.

When parents learn specific words and strategies to decode meaning from school documents, this helps them to make decisions, take actions, and maintain communication with the school's personnel and teachers. Except for Mercedes, who does not read and write, all parents in the study mentioned that they identify key words that translate into actions, which become parents' response to the documents. By decoding the school documents, parents perform what Lave calls "understanding-in-practice" (Lave, 1993, p. 51). For instance, all of them mentioned that when they see the words *field trip* they know the children will be out of school, *van de paseo* [they go on a trip], thus parents have to sign the document, send the permission slip back to school, and decide on a lunch option. This implies that parents internalize the meaning of words and develop knowledge and understanding of school practices in the constant interactions they have with the schools.

*Question 2: How do immigrant parents learn about standard cultural practices of school-parents interaction in the United States?*

I highlight two main findings on how parents in this study learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement. The first key finding refers to how parents use their funds of knowledge to understand school practices and to optimize their efforts to support their children's education. Parents attempt to accommodate to school demands and "maximize positive outcomes for themselves and their children" (Reese, 2003, p. 38). As Espinoza-Herold (2007) points out parents' use of funds of knowledge "becomes the nucleus of an affordance network" (p. 262) meaning that parents use their funds of knowledge in dynamic and variable contexts as many stocks of resources.

Parents draw from their funds of knowledge in a variety of ways and use them as resources to accommodate to school demands or to engage in their children's education in ways parents feel are appropriate. For instance, repetition and experience were crucial for Helena in order to learn about practices and to comply with school requirements. On other hand, Sandra constantly brought back her personal school experiences to pair them with those school practices that seemed similar to hers. Her previous funds of knowledge allowed Sandra to draw direct relationships with practices that otherwise would be out of context or difficult to understand. In the case of Jose Luis and Mercedes, they lacked a baseline educational framework to relate to. Instead, their parental effort focuses on encouraging Lilia and their other children not to drop out of school. Since Mercedes does not read nor write in Spanish, her previous references to school were almost non-existent. In order to support her children, Mercedes draws from her cultural resources, such as *consejos*, to encourage her children to achieve academic success.

Parents chose from different repertoires of resources, such as institutional practices, material goods, or cultural capital as their funds of knowledge to accomplish their goals. Therefore, this finding in parent's use of funds of knowledge adds to the understanding of how,

who, and what kind of resources parents use to engage in their children's education and to help in achieving what they consider to be the educational goal. However, it is important to point out that these goals vary from family to family and translate into different expectations of the educational experience for both parents and children.

The second main finding refers to how parents learn about standard cultural practices of parental involvement, where sharing of information and resources is crucial for them. Parents seek for spaces of *convivencia*<sup>10</sup> to build community ties and to understand the educational system in the United States. Finding places for *convivencia* helped parents to figure out the how-tos of life in the United States, and to compare their personal experiences as newcomers to Southwest Virginia.

For instance, Helena found at the service-learning program a space for *convivencia* where she also learned about other programs and services in the community. Besides, the service-learning students shared their knowledge about school practices, mainly those students who were student-teachers. Similarly to Helena, Sandra liked her experiences and the *convivencia* in the service-learning program. After leaving the program, she made the transition of having a space for *convivencia* in the service-learning program to having a community of parents to share experiences at her church. In the third case, Mercedes found at church a community of mothers dealing with similar issues, such as her daughter's teenage pregnancy. The shared experience with other mothers in the community helped Mercedes cope with the emotional stress the pregnancy brought to her life (Elenes, et al., 2001). Mercedes draws from *consejos* and her funds of knowledge to encourage Lilia and her siblings to finish high school. Because of her limited education, Mercedes' main approach to support her children's education consists of *consejos* to

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<sup>10</sup> As Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) point out there is no perfect or simple translation to the word *convivencia*, they have defined it as the following: "*Convivencia* refers to the flowing moments of collective creation and solidarity, the bonding that developed from a joint emerging moral quest against the backdrop of experiential sharing" (p. 35).

guide her children. Thus her main resource is sharing with them her cultural knowledge.

Mercedes reinforces the value of education in her children, as something that can improve the quality of life.

*Question 3: How do Mexican immigrant parents describe and evaluate their experiences of getting involved with their children's schools?*

Parent's description of their experiences can be summarized in four main findings. First, parents expressed that they feel fear and frustration when interacting with their children's schools. All parents described difficulties in understanding the teachers, as well as feelings of limited opportunities to get more involved in the schools. In the three cases, parents felt that the language barrier significantly hinders their interactions with the school.

Frustration was the main feeling parent's expressed, but in all cases parents expressed different reasons for this feeling. Helena's case, she accommodates to school demands by helping her children with homework and attending parent-teacher conferences and festivals. Cultural differences and her perception of school personnel's expectations made it difficult for Helena to fully enjoy school activities and to have a purpose for becoming more involved. Similar to Helena, Sandra accommodates by supporting her children with school work. Nevertheless, as her children progressed in school, helping her children with homework had become harder. Sandra accommodated to school demands, but she resisted service providers whom she perceived as disenfranchising her and her familial values. By comparing her daughter's experiences with those of other children from White middle-class backgrounds, she rates her cultural values as superior. Jose Luis' frustrations came from feeling overwhelmed with his responsibilities of providing for the household along with having to deal with schoolwork. Besides, attending parent-teacher conferences was an extra burden for Jose Luis and Mercedes,

because she had to miss a day's work to attend. Mercedes felt limited not only because of the language barrier but also because of her lack of literacy. Mercedes' frustration came from her feeling of dependency on her husband and her children for navigating and interacting with the school and service providers.

As key second finding, data showed that despite their feelings of anxiety all parents want to be involved in their children's schooling experience in the United States. Moreover, all parents stated that they feel they are involved in their children's education. Parents' efforts focus on supporting the children with homework, either sitting with them to complete assignments or making sure they have a place and time to do homework. My findings follow the same line of Waterman's (2006), given that my data contest wide spread assumptions that say it is only the interest and responsibility of the school to promote parental involvement in immigrant families. Contrary to this assumption, "Mexican immigrant parents bring hope for, and are committed to [parent-school partnerships]" (Waterman, 2006, p.154). My findings show that parents look for opportunities to participate in their children's education and make efforts to do so regardless of their limited English proficiency.

A third finding is the difference in the parents' efforts to become visible to the school staff or at least to the school teachers, something that varies across all three cases. Helena and Sandra demonstrate their interest by attending parent-teacher conferences, being part school events, and being present at the school when they have an opportunity. However, Jose Luis and Mercedes' efforts may not be as visible for the school administrators and teachers since the Hernandezes constantly miss conferences and school events. The findings point out that sorting the cultural and language differences, and becoming visible to the school staff depended on

individual efforts. As a result, the experiences, capacities, values, and involvement of parents like Jose Luis and Mercedes may remain invisible to the school system.

Finally, findings suggest that it was hard for the immigrant parents in this study to fulfill the role of parents as educational partners. Their efforts were devoted to provide for their children, to encourage them to take advantage of their educational opportunities, and to comply with parental school requirements in their best capacity. Immigrant parents' views on parental involvement practices were different from those expected by the schools. Still parents in the three case studies want to get involved in the educational experience of their children. Furthermore, parents were committed to develop parent-school relationships and pursued this goal to the best of their available resources and skills.

### **Overarching Objective**

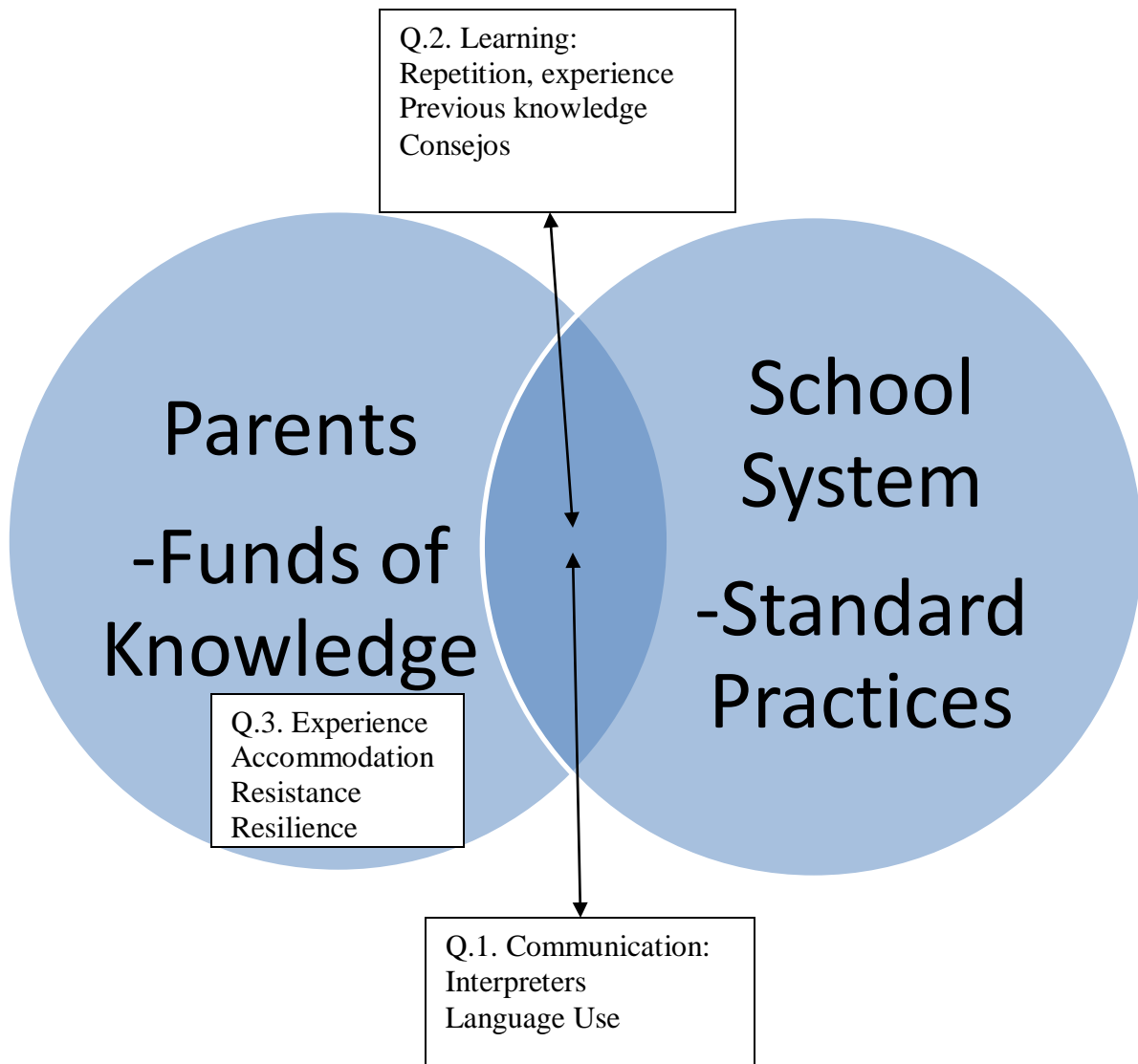
*How do low income Mexican immigrant parents make sense of the school system in the United States?*

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to see the interconnection of the findings across the research questions and to place them in a broader picture. Findings of this research provide insight on the many pieces of the puzzle that immigrant parents have to organize in order to make sense of the school system in the United States. Communicating with the school and going to meetings and events represent only the first step for parents to become and maintain involvement in their children schools. Furthermore, repetition, experience, personal schooling experiences, and *convivencia* are important for parents in order to learn standard cultural practices of parental involvement, and to navigate the school system. Finally, parents accommodate, resist, and face with resilience the everyday challenges of living in a foreign country, with a different language, and in a different cultural setting.

In the following diagram, I present the relationships between receiving information, learning about practices, and parents' self-assessment of experiences:

Figure 1

*Re-learning the Script of Parental Involvement*



Immigrant parents have to re-learn the script of school practices. Parents re-learn cultural practices unaware of how far they have moved in the literacy process of learning about parental involvement in the United States. First, when parents engage in affordance networks to seek information and resources, and to communicate with the school, they enhance their possibilities of functioning in a society different from the one they grew up. Moreover, looking for spaces of *convivencia* also creates spaces for a learning community of parents seeking for information so as to make sense of the schools and life in the United States. Finally, parents rely in their funds of knowledge and experiences to face challenges. The acquisitions of these skills are valuable because they are being learned in a context and involve the use of standard practices in this setting. Literacy practices are meaningful to the students to the extent they relate to daily realities and help them act on them (Freire, 1970). The literacy practices of the parents in this study not only help them to perform parental involvement duties, but also increase their skills to navigate in everyday activities in this country.

### **Implications of the Study**

Insight from this research can have broader implications, beyond the Southwest Virginia area, given that parental involvement is correlated with students' academic success and that the segment of Latino students is expected to grow. The segment of the United States population considered Latino or of Latin American origin has grown considerably in the last decades. According to Fry and Gonzales (2008), the Latino population is the fastest-growing minority in the United States. In 2008, Latinos comprise 15% of the total population in the United States, of which two thirds are of Mexican origin (Pew Hispanic, 2008). Changes in the demographic profile in the United States will impact all aspects of life, being education one of the main areas of change. It is predicted that by 2030, the number of children ages 5 to 13 considered of Latino

origin ages will almost double, representing one-fourth of the total K-12 school population (Gibson, 2002). For these reasons, it is imperative to consider the educational options available for children of Latino origin that will lead to their academic success and an integral part in the life of this country. The research I presented in this dissertation is a partial response to this need, since it addresses the case of children of Mexican immigrant parents.

In this section, I will discuss the implications of my research in terms of developing theories on parental involvement for immigrant parents, and the implications of my research findings for teaching preparation programs, local school or service programs, and parental involvement in the context of the NCLB. I present the implications divided in four main topics: policies, teacher preparation programs, best practices, and implications for programs. Finally, I draft questions to be addressed in future research to further explore the intricate process by which immigrant parents re-learn the parental script in the U.S. school system.

### **What is Parental Involvement?**

One of the problems with the concept of parental involvement is that it means different things to different people. The answer to the question: “What exactly constitutes parental involvement?” may have as many answers as parents and schools are. Therefore, I use Epstein and Sanders’ (2000) typology to group some of the activities that fit under the umbrella of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, learning at home, volunteering, decision making, collaborating with the community. Based on my research findings I make a call to reconsider how we think about parental involvement in order to include the contextual differences and expectations for immigrant parents.

According to the study’s findings, immigrant parents’ practices of involvement can be included mainly in three of the six types of parental involvement activities: parenting,

communication, and learning at home. 1. *Parenting*: All parents in this study place a high value on education and are eager to support their children's efforts to stay at school and to achieve academic success (with different connotation for each family). Parents place a high value on *educación* (education) and they try to show this to their children and to contribute to their children's education. Parents encourage children to be good students through fostering of good manners and mainly *respeto* (respect). 2. *Communication*. The findings demonstrate that parents' efforts are geared to communicate and to maintain communication channels with the school. Parents use the interpreters available for them in their affordance network; they look for resources in and outside the household to establish communication with the schools, learn about school programs, and supervise their children's education progress. For immigrant parents, learning English in the context of their children's schooling and communicating with the schools is an intricate process. Although, schools provide some interpreting resources, better and more accurate interpreting options are needed so that parents can establish a dialogue with the schools. 3. *Learning at home*: Parents place special emphasis on creating a supporting environment to help their children learning at home. All parents made efforts to supervise and to help their children with their homework. The help that parents provide ranged from sitting down and doing homework with their children to supervising children getting school work done by themselves. Parents were interested in helping with homework, nonetheless language, literacy, and educational background were crucial in determining how much parents got involved in homework tasks. A tutoring service or a hot line for children to solve their questions about homework can be very useful to support parents' with learning at home.

Parents in this study faced constraints that hindered involvement, in terms of the other three elements of parental involvement (volunteering, decision making and collaboration with

the community). The findings from the study show that at least Helena and Sandra know about volunteering opportunities at school and the Parents Association (PTA) committees. However, their feelings of fear and anxiety about their English skills limit their participation in school committees. In terms of implications, the limited participation of parents in these instances of decision making have broader implications in the school system; immigrant parents of Latino background are not being involved in the decision making process of the school. Parents have no say in activities to support their children's learning, events, and/or routines taking place in the school. For instance, Helena accommodates to school activities, attend festivals, or encourages her children's participation at events, but she does not feel those events are cultural relevant for her. Parents and children from diverse cultural backgrounds experience disconnections between the world at home and the world at school (Ballenger, 1999; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993). Immigrant families stay at the margins of the society without full participation in the school. Therefore, overcoming the language barrier is essential to foster collaboration between immigrant families and teachers, school administrators, and school personnel overall (Waterman, 2006). My research findings indicate that parents want to participate in their children's education. In order to foster parents' contextual learning and English I would recommend ESL classes for parents. Although many ESL classes are already offered, those classes are not designed to support parental involvement efforts. I recommend classes that would combine learning about parental involvement practices and English.

### **Implications for the Policies of NCLB**

Findings from this study can not only increase our understanding of Latino parent's parental involvement but also aid to reach the broader goal of student's academic success. In the context of accountability and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), special attention has been

given to the issue of involving parents in their children's education. As stated by the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE), the new educational reform legislation mandates that each school district should develop strategies intended to foster parental involvement. For instance in the Parental Involvement Guidance (p. 3) suggests that parental involvement is "the participation of parents in regular, two ways and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities" (p. 3). The findings from this study show that all parents are interested and engage in their children's education as far as their context and possibilities. Parents' funds of knowledge play an integral role in helping their child's learning. The implication of this study is that immigrant Mexican parents cannot be considered as educational partners in the same way white middle class parents are, and differences in their parental involvement practices should be valued as well. We need to move forward "reductionists' views of what counts as parental involvement, and/ or which of the parental involvement strategies are better to support children's learning. (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). Statements like the one in the NCLB act do not consider immigrant parents efforts and possibilities to support their children. The expectations are that parents should be educational partners without understanding the ethnic, class, or gender differences of the parents.

I suggest that parental involvement strategies have to be recognized regardless if they fit with traditional or non-traditional practices (Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2001; Ellenes et al, 2001), and/or are performed in the formal school space or the more personal space created by parents (Perez Carreon et al. 2005, Espinoza-Herold, 2007). Findings from this study demonstrate that immigrant parents face the reality to dealing with multiple responsibilities, such as providing for the household and living in a country with a language different to them, but still they find ways to support their children at school.

Moreover, I agree with Waterman (2006) in the need to replace the term parental involvement by a term that emphasizes home-school collaborations. The term parental involvement still has a schoolcentric connotation where parents have the main responsibility to comply with school requirements. As Waterman (2006) suggests home-school collaboration opens alternatives for parents and schools to create alternative spaces of sharing in a mutual and more equitable partnership. In this regard, the way I envision home-school collaboration in the context of immigrant parents would require learning the community empathetically, be respectful and respondent to diverse parents, and moved from the schoolcentric notion of parental involvement to parent-school collaborations.

### **Implications for Educational Programs and Services in the School and the Community**

According to Epstein and Sanders (2000) collaboration is an integral part of parent-school engagement, which entails identifying and integrating services to support the school, the children, and the parents. Findings from this study demonstrate that parents constantly seek for places of *convivencia*. Spaces for *convivencia* provided parents with community ties but also with sources of information about programs and services in the community. Helena and Sandra learned about services they were not aware before through the monthly meetings in the service-learning program. On other hand, Sandra, Jose Luis, and Mercedes found in their church community a place to develop solidarity and community ties.

Successful programs documented in the literature have the commonality that administrators support immigrant parent's efforts to become involved in the school system (Lopez, et al, 2001; Scriber, et al., 1999). A commonality in these programs is that administrators actively listen to the parents and bridge the voice of the community into the school. Successful programs are built on cultural differences, and understanding of the sociocultural context of the

parents. Low-income immigrant families face multiple challenges: earning below the poverty level, having to move constantly, and having to difficulties to communicate in English, to mention a few. Therefore, I also advocate for school administrators to make an effort to actively listen to the parents, take into account their needs and expectations, and acknowledge their ways of understanding what is good for their children.

### **Implications for Teaching Preparation Programs**

In the relationship between teachers and immigrant parents with low income, privilege and power are mostly on the teachers' side (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Teacher preparation programs should be committed to be inclusive, serve minority children, and successfully support parent-school relations, responding to current changes in the population. Including diverse perspectives in schools can be challenging and embracing immigrant Latino parents and their practices of involvement can be complicated as well. The findings from this study show that it is very important for parents to develop a relationship with their children's teachers. Helena made every effort to communicate with the school and tries to make herself visible to the school staff and teachers. She hoped her efforts to be well appreciated by her children's teachers. Sandra received help from the ESL teacher who finds interpreters for the parent teacher conferences, and calls her to offer updates on programs or issues with the children. Jose Luis and Mercedes have less contact with the teachers due to their limited English proficiency and their job demands. However, but at the parent-teacher conference I attend with them, I observed a group of highly concerned and caring teachers willing and wanting to support Octavio's progress at school.

Developing caring practices opens the possibilities for establishing relationships with parents of diverse backgrounds (Noddings, 1992). "Caring involves responding to the expressed needs of the cared for" (Noddings, 2003, p. 242). Staff working with immigrant parents has the

challenge to overcome deficit notions and the schoolcentric idea of parental involvement. As Rosebery et al. (2001) point out, teachers and administrators must learn to appreciate the community empathetically. In Sandra's case, the ESL teacher was good intentioned in her efforts to support Sandra, regardless she develop strategies to engage the parents without considering Sandra's needs and marginalizing her efforts and knowledge about her own children's education. A challenge for school administrators and teachers is how to care for immigrant families without losing dignity and respect for their needs (Noddings, 1992).

In the context of the service-learning program, the visits that Irene and David performed to Helena's house during their time as student teachers in the program helped them to understand Helena's needs from her own perspective. Similar to *research visits* discussed in the funds of knowledge approach, Irene's and David's home visits had the potential of transforming their own teaching in two ways. Firstly, these visits helped Irene and David as pre-service teachers to understand how Helena preserved the functionality of the household. Moreover, their first-hand contact with Helena challenged deficit assumptions about immigrant parents. Secondly, it opened the possibility for Irene and David, as student-teachers, to learn and understand the funds of knowledge in the household, and to incorporate them into the curricula they design as teachers in their future practice. Irene understood that Helena wants to support her children with their homework. Rather than replacing Helena in that role, Irene looked for a resource, like the homework book, so Helena could get the support she needed (information in Spanish) and in turn support her children's education. In David's case, comparing his experience with Helena's son eased Helena's anxiety as she did not have any other way to relate to her son's experience. Compared to *research visits* and ethnographic reflection, the service-learning visits enabled change in teachers' attitudes and behaviors, fostered a relationship between the households and

the schools, and allowed better relationships between parents and teachers (González, et al., 2005). Moreover, in terms of parental involvement, learning about the families' funds of knowledge permits teachers and school personnel to understand Latino parents' non-traditional literacy and practices of involvement. Based on these findings, I would suggest that teacher preparation programs to incorporate experiences similar to the service-learning program, where pre-service teacher can develop relationships with parents of diverse background and learn to understand their needs, expectations, and funds of knowledge and incorporate those in their teacher practices.

### **Questions for Future Research**

In this section, I propose some questions to be addressed in future research to further explore the intricate process by which immigrant parents re-learn the parental script in the U.S. school system. First, I foresee in my future research to study the different roles of Latino fathers and mothers in parental involvement. The intention of this dissertation was to include only the women's perspective on parental involvement practices. However, when Jose Luis came along, it became a study about parents rather than mothers. Further research needs to be done to better depict the roles of mothers and fathers in parent-schools relations, and in the particular context of Latino immigrant families. In another line of future research, I propose to explore experiences such as Irene and David's experiences in the service-learning class, which positively impacted Helena and her understanding of practices in the United States. A follow up study with both of them would focus on how they transfer any of the lessons learned with Helena as in-service teachers into their teaching practice in a multicultural classroom.

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**APPENDIX A**

**VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Informed Consent for Participants**

Title of Project: **Re-Learning the Script of Parental Involvement; Mexican Women in Southwest Virginia**

Investigators: **Marcela Uribe, Dr. Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs**

I am inviting you to participate in my research project. This project looks at Mexican parents and how they communicate with their children's schools while living in the United States.

Purpose:

The main purpose of this study is to document and examine the experiences of Mexican parents who have immigrated to the United States and how they communicate and interact with the American schools. This study is part of my research for my dissertation in the School of Education at Virginia Tech.

Procedures:

During this study I would like you to give me a chance to visit you in 5 different times. The study will take place between October 5 and December 1<sup>st</sup>. I will schedule the visits depending on when is the best time for you. I would like to spend two or three hours each time, but if you only have one hour to be with me that is fine too. During the first visit you do not have to do anything different from normal, besides letting me be with you and learn more about your daily routine after your children come from school. During the second, third, and fourth visits I will ask you some questions. I would ask you about your life in the United States and your experiences raising your children in this country. During the last visit, I will ask more questions only if I have questions about our previous conversations.

I would like to record our conversations. I will ask you verbally each time if I can record our conversation or if you do not want me to, I won't. I will only use this tape to transcribe the conversations, and the tape will be destroyed as soon as possible. By transcribing our conversations, I can remember and study everything you have told me. For the final report I

would like you to choose a nickname in order to stay anonymous. I will use this name in all the paperwork. In this way no one will know about whom I am talking.

Risks:

There should be minimum risks for you in participating in this project. You have the right to answer or decline any question. If you choose not to answer or participate in the interview or the study, it will not affect your life in any way. You can end the visits when you would like, or you can ask me to stop recording anytime. I would appreciate also if you would ask me if you have doubts about any questions or their purpose. Also you can tell me if I am asking something that is too personal, or you are uncomfortable answering the questions. You can tell me if you would not like to talk about any specific subject.

Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to you. However, by sharing your experiences, you are allowing others to better understand life as an immigrant. I personally believe that it is important to share this part of immigration history that is not widely known or appreciated.

Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality:

When the results of the investigation are made public, your real name will not be used. For example, in the final report I will say something like: <<Maria feels that the schools in the United States are similar to her school in Mexico>>. Of course, your real name is not Maria. With this in mind, I would ask you to be as honest and open as you feel comfortable being.

On my part, I will do everything possible to keep things confidential, I will not share your real name, I will not share any detail that would compromise you, and I will destroy all the tapes at the end of the study. However, I have to explain to you that sometimes, despite all my efforts, your identity can be compromised. For example, a person close to you who reads my thesis or the scientific articles resulting from this investigation can identify to whom I am referring to. This might be uncommon but it can happen, despite my efforts.

Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to leave from participating in this study at any time. In this case, I will only ask you to inform me that you do not want to participate in this study anymore.

By signing this consent form you are verifying that you have read and understood the Informed Consent, and the terms and conditions of this project. You are also saying that I

answered any questions you might have had about the project and your participation. Finally, you accept that you are a voluntary participant; you have consented to let me use any information I obtain in the final paper and in any oral or written presentations, so long as your anonymity is protected. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw without any problem at any time.

Finally, I thank you in advance for your participation.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Investigators:

Marcela Uribe (540) 552-3023

Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs (540) 231- 4658

David Moore (540) 231-4991

Asst. Vice President for Research Compliance

## APPENDIX B

### VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

#### Documento de Consentimiento

Título del proyecto: **Re-Aprendiendo como Involucrarse en la Escuela; Madres Mexicanas en el Sureste de Virginia.**

Investigadores: **Marcela Uribe, Dr. Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs.**

Esta es una invitación para participar en mi proyecto de investigación. Este proyecto es para mí investigación de tesis y se trata de investigar como las madres mexicanas se comunican con la escuela de sus hijos en los Estados Unidos.

Objetivo:

El principal objetivo de esta investigación es recuperar y examinar la experiencia de los padres mexicanos que han emigrado a los Estados Unidos y como se relacionan con las escuelas en los Estados Unidos. Este estudio lo llevo a cabo porque es parte de mi investigación de tesis en la facultad de educación en la universidad Virginia Tech.

Procedimientos:

Para llevar a cabo este estudio me gustaría que usted me permitiera visitarla en 5 diferentes ocasiones, entre las fechas del 5 de Octubre al 1ero de Diciembre. Yo programare las visitas dependiendo del tiempo que sea más conveniente para usted. Durante las visitas me gustaría estar en su casa por dos o tres horas, pero si sólo tiene tiempo por una hora, también está bien.

Durante la primera visita usted no tiene que hacer nada diferente a lo que hace normalmente, simplemente quiero pasar ese tiempo con usted y aprender cómo es su rutina diaria después de que sus hijos llegan de la escuela. En la segunda, tercera y cuarta visita me gustaría hacerle algunas preguntas sobre su vida en los Estados Unidos y como ha sido su experiencia de educar a sus hijos en este país. Durante la última visita yo le haré más preguntas sólo si tengo dudas sobre nuestras conversaciones anteriores.

Yo le voy a pedir me deje grabar nuestras conversaciones para no perder ningún detalle. Cada vez que empiece una grabación le pediré permiso para encender la grabadora, pero si usted no se siente cómoda con la grabadora no lo haré. Yo voy a utilizar la grabación únicamente para poder pasar la entrevista en papel y luego destruiré el casete. Con la entrevista en papel puedo estudiar y recordar mejor todo lo que usted me diga. Para el estudio me gustaría que usted escoja un nombre diferente al suyo para que así haya absoluta discreción y yo pueda resguardar su identidad lo más posible. Este nombre también será el que yo utilice en todos los documentos que se produzcan. Utilizando otro nombre nadie podrá saber con certeza de quién o quienes estamos hablando.

#### Riesgos:

Debe haber un riesgo mínimo para usted al participar en este estudio. Usted tiene el derecho de no contestar cualquier pregunta si no quiere. Si usted escoge no contestar o decide no participar en el estudio esto no le va a afectar de ninguna manera. Usted puede terminar las visitas cuando usted quiera, o bien que yo pare la grabadora y deje de grabar en cualquier momento que lo desee. También me gustaría que me pregunte cuando no entienda alguna pregunta o el objetivo de la misma. O me diga si yo le pregunto algo que le parece demasiado personal. Si le molesta hablar de algo, puede decirme que prefiere no hablar de ese tema, sin ningún problema.

#### Beneficios:

No hay beneficios directos para usted excepto que me dará a mí, como mexicana, y a las personas de los Estados Unidos la oportunidad de compartir sus experiencias y su vida en este país. Personalmente creo que así se da a conocer una parte de la historia de la migración que muchas veces se desconoce.

#### Límites del anonimato y la confidencialidad

Cuando los resultados de la investigación se hagan públicos, no se va a usar el nombre verdadero de ninguno de los participantes. Cuando yo comparta su historia con alguna otra persona yo la voy a llamar por el nombre que usted escogió. Por ejemplo, yo diré <<María piensa que las escuelas en los Estados Unidos son similares a la escuela a la que ella asistió en

México>>. Claro que María no es su verdadero nombre, cambiando su nombre lo que trato de hacer es proteger su identidad. Con esto en mente, le voy a pedir que sea tan honesta como pueda y se sienta cómoda.

Por mi parte yo trataré de mantener toda la información de forma confidencial, no diré su verdadero nombre, ni compartiré ningún detalle que la pueda comprometer o avergonzar. También destruiré todas las grabaciones en cuanto termine el estudio. Sin embargo, a veces a pesar de mis esfuerzos existe una pequeña posibilidad de que alguien sepa a quien me refiero. Por ejemplo, alguna persona cercana a usted que lea mi tesis o artículos científicos resultados de esta investigación podría identificarla. Esto es muy poco común pero puede ocurrir, a pesar de todos mis esfuerzos.

#### Libertad de retirarse del estudio

Usted se puede dejar de participar en este estudio cuando quiera, solamente le pido que me informe su decisión de que ya no quiere participar.

Al firmar este documento usted dice que leyó y entendió el permiso de autorización y las condiciones de este proyecto. También dice que se ha contestado cualquier duda que tenga sobre este proyecto y sobre su participación. Finalmente, usted acepta participar voluntariamente y me da su consentimiento para utilizar la información obtenida para escribir la tesis o usar la información para cualquier otra presentación oral o escrita, siempre y cuando yo proteja su anonimato Si usted acepta participar, le recuerdo que puede retirarse del proyecto a cualquier hora y sin ningún problema.

Finalmente le agradezco de antemano su participación.

Firma \_\_\_\_\_ fecha\_\_\_\_\_

#### Investigadores:

Marcela Uribe León. (540) 552-3023

Dr. Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs (540) 231-4658

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Research Compliance/IRB

**APPENDIX C**

Interview Questions

Interview 1

- a) Talk about your experiences of how your parents get involved in the school back in Mexico.
- b) Describe your experiences of you how you have gotten involved in the school here in the United States.

Interview 2

- a) Please tell me about the first time you went to the school.
- b) Describe another time you went to the school.
- c) Describe how you receive information from the school?

Interview 3

- a) Describe in what kinds of activities parents participate in at school.
- b) Describe in what kind of activities you participate in at your children' school.
- c) Talk about ways you learn about activities at your child's school.

**APPENDIX D**

Preguntas de la Entrevista

Entrevista 1

- c) Por favor, hábleme sobre su experiencia de como sus padres se involucraban en la escuela cuando usted iba a la escuela en México.
- d) Por favor, describa sus experiencias de cómo se ha involucrado usted en la escuela de sus hijos aquí en los Estados Unidos.

Entrevista 2

- d) Por favor hable de la primera vez que usted fue a la escuela de sus hijos.
- e) ¿Puede describir una segunda vez?
- f) Describa como recibe usted información de la escuela

Entrevista 3

- d) ¿Puede describir en qué tipo de actividades los participan los padres en la escuela?
- e) Describa en qué tipo de actividades usted participa en la escuela.
- f) ¿Me puede describir como sabe que actividades hay en la escuela de sus hijos?