¡Quiero estudiar! Mexican Immigrant Mothers’ Participation in Their Children’s Schooling—and Their Own

by

Alice Anne Miano

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Committee in Charge:
Professor Glynda Hull, Co-chair
Professor Guadalupe Valdés, Co-chair
Professor Sarah Warshauer Freedman
Professor William Hanks

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¡Quiero estudiar! Mexican Immigrant Mothers’ Participation in Their Children’s Schooling—and Their Own
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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the literacy practices and parental school involvement of a group of seven first-generation Mexican immigrant mothers who participated in native language literacy classes designed for parents at their children’s school. Using ethnographic methods to detail the mothers’ lived histories, cultural moorings, and current practices at home and at school, the study found that the mothers participated in their children’s schooling—and their own—in a variety of ways, regardless of their individually varying levels of access to print and formal schooling. Specifically, the mothers enjoined their own family literacy networks, engaging their children in needed literacy tasks at home that supported school-based literacies in kind. These social networks involved print and non-print literate members in exchanges of various forms of assistance, print-related and otherwise. In parent classes, framed as a safe haven for readers and writers at all levels, the mothers similarly engaged in exchanges of print literacies and other forms of cultural capital, such as knowledge about school and community doings.

Through words and actions, the mothers defined parental participation as support for their children’s schooling in seven broad moral and material categories, many of which have yet to be recognized in much of the academic literature. Specifically, the mothers defined and enacted parent involvement typologically as: parental presence on the school grounds; networking with other parents, teachers, or administrators; participating in school or community activities; literacy and numeracy support; providing material support for their children such as food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, and transportation; providing moral support such as encouraging children or keeping after them as needed; and acting as positive role models for their children.

The study suggests that viewing parental involvement from parental perspectives may give educators and researchers greater insights into the efforts, achievements, and challenges of parents from a variety of racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.
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Transcription Conventions

, brief pause
… sustained pause
[...] words omitted
*italics* italicized words indicate emphasis in speaker’s voice
[ ] words in brackets convey relevant non-verbal information or word inserted for purposes of clarification
This dissertation is dedicated

in love and faith to

Mike Manley

and

Eva Candelaria Elliott

in memoriam.
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Chapter 1: Introduction. Growing up in a “Nation of Immigrants”: A Tale of Two Grandmothers and of muchas mamás

The unconscious is history—the collective history that has produced our categories of thought, and the individual history through which they have been inculcated in us. It is, for example, from the social history of educational institutions...and from the (forgotten or repressed) history of our singular relationship to these institutions, that we can expect some real revelations about the objective and subjective structures...that always, in spite of ourselves, orient our thought.


What the ethnographer is in fact faced with...is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another....

—Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (1973)

We have crowned ourselves a “nation of immigrants,” and yet we continuously reject all sorts of newcomers, especially those who appear darker-skinned, less formally educated, or less economically endowed than ourselves. How easily we forget the makeup of our ancestors—whether voluntary or involuntary immigrants, or natives made to feel as strangers in their own land. Their courage and perseverance helped pave the way, in spite of a society that similarly despised them, for a life in which their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren would likely toil under the sun no more.

Caught up myself in this social tide, I begin this dissertation with a brief recounting of my own story. Aside from the self-gratification or personal catharsis inherent in such an exercise, I do this for two reasons. First, I hope to suggest the “objective and subjective structures,” to use Bourdieu’s (1997) words above, that have oriented my thinking, and, in the spirit of “doing ethnography” à la Geertz (1973), to likewise suggest where these structures may be “knotted up into one another” as well as into those of this study’s focal subjects. Second, I wish to explain, quite simply, how it was that a “mere” Spanish teacher ended up doing an ethnographic study of Mexican immigrant mothers’ participation in their children’s schooling and their own. I thus ask the reader to wander briefly with me as I explore my own immigrant roots, to ponder what it was that distanced me from them and what it was that brought me back.

One of my earliest memories, from when I was about four years old, is of a simple walk down the street with my maternal grandmother. We were strolling around her block in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, New York, a block where most of the residents, at least back in the sixties, hailed from Naples like my grandmother. As I walked along holding her hand, Grandma Carrie must have struck an imposing figure, with her broad shoulders encased in a long, thick fur jacket, and her wavy jet-black hair piled under a
pillbox hat, framing her wide, powdered white face. To me at four years old, my grand-
mother seemed like the oldest person on the planet. But then, we suddenly stopped while
she held court with a tiny, shriveled old woman who, as impossible as it seemed to me at
the time, was even older than my grandmother, and yet barely taller than me. I still recall
my embarrassment that my grandmother even gave this graying, minuscule woman the
time of day, let alone demonstrate complete civility and politeness throughout a conver-
sation that I thought would never end. But I was doubly embarrassed that Grandma en-
gaged in a full blown conversation with this tiny creature in, well, baby talk.

I’m not sure how old I was when I actually realized that Grandma Carrie, who had
emigrated from Naples when she was just about as old as I was that day, had been speak-
ing to the woman in Neapolitan. Perhaps I figured it out after listening to the endless ban-
ter that reverberated through the household, year after year, whenever my Grandpa Sam
walked into Grandma Carrie’s kitchen. Whatever the case, what I have never forgotten is
the respect my grandmother showed to the littlest of little old ladies that sunny day in
Brooklyn in the mid-sixties.

Fast forward two decades, and I recall a similar scene with my paternal grandpar-
ents, Kate and Sal, who lived in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn in a cozy apartment
that gazed toward the Verrazano Bridge. Of Sicilian origin, my grandmother’s family
hailed from the capital city, Palermo, and my grandfather’s from the rural town of Nico-
sia, where he had lived briefly as a boy. On this occasion, we were celebrating my grand-
parents’ 60th wedding anniversary, and several guests, all relatives, were filling the living
room with Grandma Kate at center stage, receiving each visitor with her characteristic
shouts of excitement, hugs, and kisses. Abruptly, however, her tone changed when a
graying, disheveled woman, who, as I recall, was missing a few teeth, entered the room.
Suddenly my grandmother exited center stage to offer this woman, apparently a foreign
dignitary, a special chair. For that moment, Grandma Kate focused all her attention on the
seemingly toothless woman who spoke no English. I couldn’t make out what they were
saying, so I assumed it was Sicilian and not the Italian I had studied in college. Still, why
did my grandmother make such a fuss over this uncomely woman who, unlike my
grandmother, who’d attended Columbia’s Teachers College, seemed so uncouth and un-
educated? The woman must have been my cousin’s mother-in-law, I surmised, but all I
could remember was how Grandma Kate, in this instance, just like Grandma Carrie 20
years before, had showed the utmost deference to a woman who somehow, at least to me
at the time, seemed unworthy of such royal respect.

I have often reflected on those moments, and wondered with embarrassment and
amazement at how I so easily disdained the old women, the first because she was so aged
and tiny and spoke no English, and the second, who also spoke no English, because her
appearance and language use made her seem poor and uneducated. As a four-year-old,
perhaps I could have been forgiven, but in the second instance, I was in my mid-twenties,
yet I still had not learned what came so naturally to my first- and second-generation
grandparents—respect—especially for immigrant elders. Certainly such respect must
have been integral to their upbringing, but I suspect, too, that my grandparents had wit-
nessed in their own parents some of the hardship and sacrifice that many immigrant par-
ents endure trying to carve out a new life in a new culture to give their families a better
future.
After admitting such a lack of empathy on my own part, then, it may seem odd that the granddaughter of 20th century Neapolitan and Sicilian immigrants would want to write about 21st century Mexican immigrants, and yet it has been a natural, albeit long, journey. I grew up in California, far from Brooklyn, or as I now refer to it, the Old Country, feeling a bit like a fish out of water. I was frustrated that I couldn’t speak a lick of the heritage languages that I felt should have been my birthright, angry at repeatedly being called a “dumb Italian” on the playground, and irritated at my mother’s insistence at home that, “We’re not Italian. We’re American.” True, we spoke only English and ate some form of hamburger regularly for dinner, but to deny our roots, I felt, was just plain wrong. It was logical, then, that upon transferring from my local Catholic school to a public junior high school at age 13, I should gravitate toward the many Chicana and Chicano students at my new school. Some of them spoke native Spanish, a language I’d begun to study in Catholic school two years prior, and some did not. But no matter their linguistic proclivities, all of my new friends took pride in their “Chicana@hood,” if you will: many studied Spanish in school or regularly used some phrases in Spanish; they studied Mexican dance, culture, and history; and they called themselves “Mexican,” “Chicana,” “Chicano,” and “Mexican-American.” They did not conceal their identity; they were proud of their roots. Luckily, in 1974 when I graduated from junior high school, the Chicano Movement was in full swing, so my friends could find much cultural validation in the likes of César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and other Chican@ activists. I, too, found much cultural validation in my friends. Indeed, my best friend told me, “You’re not white, you’re Italian!” It was my Chicana and Chicano friends, then, who not only respected their own cultural roots, they were also the first peers to respect mine. They neither marginalized me nor lumped me together with that solid “white” mass of European ethnic groups. Having experienced prejudice in their classrooms and communities, well beyond the playground ribbing I had taken, they understood the need to stand firm in one’s identity no matter the challenges faced.

And I likewise admired their parents, some immigrant and some U.S.-born, who spent a great deal of time not only with their own children, but also with their children’s friends, like me. My Chican@ friends’ parents were the first to bring Spanish alive for me outside the classroom—practicing with me the dialogues I was required to memorize for class and teaching me local Spanish expressions that never appeared in those classroom dialogues. And they carted me along to various cultural events as well, folkloric dance festivals, concerts, and celebrations of Cinco de Mayo and the 16th of September. I am forever grateful to them for bringing to life for me a language and culture that has become an integral part of me, not only as the source of my professional livelihood, but as a key component of my adult hybrid identity, as, shall I say, a siciliana-napolitana-californiana-chicana wannabe.

If so many immigrants and their descendents helped to shape me—from my grandparents and parents, to my friends’ parents, my siblings, and peers—then it has been as a Spanish teacher that I have enacted this identity five days a week in the classroom, a place where it is all right to imperfectly simulate and culturally approximate assorted versions of la hispanidad, including the aforementioned “Chicana@hood,” even for an Italian-American fish out of water. For twenty years I have carved out this identity daily, creating a world into which I invite my students to do as I have done, to explore through
language and culture a people who, in all their Latin@\textsuperscript{1} machinations in the U.S., have managed to hang on to cultural icons and practices, and to form new ones greater than the sum of their parts, reaching out to their raíces, their roots, across borders and oceans, and across history.

So when, in between marriage, work, and family, I finally managed to carve out the time to pursue a doctorate, it seemed only natural that I would embark upon the study of second language acquisition and one day dissertate on that topic. The problem was that it didn’t take me long at all, in delving into my own history of second language acquisition, to recognize the vast debt I owed to my grandparents and my friends’ parents, the natural bilinguals I had been privileged to know and interact with in my lifetime, for the gift of the second language that they had inspired and nurtured in me, the second language that has shaped me and given me life.

Furthermore, as I reflected on the parents of my Chican@ friends, on their lives and on all they had done for me, it seemed they had worked so hard to raise their children with love and devotion in an otherwise hostile, racist environment, rarely receiving the recognition they deserved, let alone the material benefits that are supposed to come with the so-called “American dream.” Educationally speaking, in truth, despite their dedication to their children as well as to other people’s children, by and large, my only Chican@ friends who went to college were those whose parents themselves had had the opportunity to do so.

In fact, in spite of their commitment to their children and to other kids like me, I would continuously read in the press complaints that Latin@ parents were “uninvolved” in their children’s education, leading to high drop out rates and low rates of college attendance. But I had witnessed a very different reality: I had seen firsthand the scholastic tracking system designed to dumb down the curriculum principally for children with dark skin. Indeed, although we’d shared several classes in junior high, in high school I saw many of my Chicana and Chicano friends, some of the smartest, wittiest, and most loyal people I had ever known, funneled into remedial classes. It wasn’t fair. To blame this process on their parents seemed only to aggravate already deep-seated misunderstandings between families and schools.

My best friend’s mother, for instance, wanted to be involved in her daughter’s schooling but also needed to earn a living, so she worked as a cafeteria cook and yard duty attendant at our junior high school. At the same time, in order to participate in her older, high school aged children’s education, she joined the PTA and went on to become its president. Still, her efforts at involvement did not pay off with the dividends that much of the parent involvement literature would have predicted. While all of her six children graduated from high school, only one, another of her daughters, attended college, at UCLA, for a brief period. Unfortunately, however, this daughter had been disabled by polio as a child, suffering one of the last cases of polio recorded in the Santa Clara Valley. Despite her disability, she did not receive special transportation services to help her navigate the hilly UCLA campus, nor any transition program for a Chicana student who was the first in her family to attend college.

\textsuperscript{1} I use the term Latin@ with an ampersand (@) as a shorthand form to denote both feminine (Latina) and masculine (Latino) people of Latin American birth or heritage residing (with or without official documentation) in the U.S.
Thus, when I came to UC Berkeley with the intention of pursuing doctoral studies in second language acquisition and pedagogy, I still carried these images with me. Yes, I had been a college Spanish instructor for many years, and so it would have been logical for me to focus my dissertation in applied linguistics. But as I studied second language acquisition and reflected on my own development of Spanish, I couldn’t forget my friends and what they and their parents had done for me and for others, how hard they worked, and always with kindness, good humor, love, and devotion. I couldn’t resist the urge to try to tell, if not their story, then that of other immigrant parents who struggled in a new country, worked hard to gain their foothold, and hoped for a better life and opportunities for their kids. Further, as a lifelong language learner and not just an instructor, I longed to take my Spanish more frequently out into the community, not just to volunteer, or to order a coffee or a meal, or to chat with a bank teller or a friend. I, the teacher, wanted to put my Spanish to use in a profound and meaningful way outside the classroom. That in itself could be the subject of a dissertation in applied linguistics, but for now, the story I will tell is about a group of Mexican immigrant parents in the area where I grew up. Known back then as the Santa Clara Valley, today it’s more frequently called the Silicon Valley, at the southern end of the San Francisco Bay Area. Based on a three-year ethnographic study, I will detail these parents’ struggles, hopes, and dreams against the backdrop of el valle, a region of striking contrasts: rich and poor, empowered and marginalized, privileged and exploited.

Theories of ethnography, such as those that guided my work here, insist that researchers in the field possess the ability to empathize with their subjects, to walk in their moccasins, sneakers, or guaraches, in order to present life as it appears to the study’s participants themselves, interpreting that life for others outside the community of study. So what, then, in the two decades since my mid-twenties, cultivated in me the empathy I had theretofore lacked? I believe that empathy first arose out of the educational and personal struggles I bumped up against in adulthood. Up until that time, I had witnessed very few closed doors in the world of education. True, my parents’ economic situation led me to a public university instead of a private one, but the University of California system into which I was accepted was a place of privilege nonetheless. However, my decision to marry and raise a family at an age that seemed, in hindsight, premature for a young woman with further educational aspirations, abruptly closed doors for me, erasing certain possibilities and complicating whatever options remained.

As a wife and mother, I faced expectations of putting family first, ahead of my own longings for continued learning and advanced degrees. At the same time, economic realities meant that both my husband and I would work outside the home, creating further obligations and stresses, squeezing into tight spaces the time we could devote to family, to household, and to each other. Further, what my husband perceived as my insatiable hunger for further study became a source of familial resentment. Time at work and at school meant time away from my family, and this made an indelible impact on my husband and children. The elder of my two daughters, now in her twenties, remembers me as a mother who could not go out and play on Saturdays, whose constant companions were not her children but rather a stack of papers to be reviewed and returned to her students in a timely manner. To pile additional schooling on top of a demanding job as a university lecturer (or more accurately, in my earlier years, a set of jobs at multiple institutions through which I pieced together a living) was for them adding insult to injury. At the
same time, however, just like the mothers in this study, my yearnings to continue *el estudio*, as the mothers have called it, to continue learning, would not go away. Like a baby just inches from its mother’s breast, my longings for education and erudition could not be satiated. So, when my children reached a comfortable level of maturity, I did indeed squeeze in the role of student alongside that of wife and mother, as well as, by that point, university lecturer and administrator. For if I had assumed the identity of a “*siciliana-napolitana-californiana-chicana wannabe*,” I was, even more than that, purely and simply, a learner.

Perhaps if, as a family, all we had had to contend with in my pursuit of learning were the characteristic grumblings and resentments, these may have eventually dissipated. But just weeks after I completed the first semester of my doctoral program at UC Berkeley, my husband, Mike, was diagnosed with an incurable form of brain cancer, one that, he was told, could claim his life in as few as nine months. Needless to say, at this point, I dropped out of school. But by a fluke, the paperwork I had submitted was lost, and by the time the new school year was beginning, my husband had recovered and was, at least for the time being, healthy and completely normal. It was during this period, then, that I completed my coursework and embarked upon my dissertation study.

Still, imagine the psychological pain my husband endured, and we along with him, when we were reminded, usually in the three-month increments leading up to his MRIs, that he was living on borrowed time. At times, he would take a deep breath and exclaim that every day was a gift. At others, however, when he was still healthy enough to enjoy the luxury of anger, his frustrations brewed into unbridled rage. His eruptions were, for my children and me, a source of fear and pain: fear of doing something to set him off, and pain at the ugliness of life in the face of such wrath. As his health declined, his rage settled into resignation. My own challenges as his wife also shifted, from psychological concerns to physical ones, of how to take care of him and spend as much time as possible with him, without wholly abandoning my dream and that insatiable desire to keep learning.

These experiences comprised a seven-year trajectory, nearly a third of my marriage. For my younger daughter, cancer likewise overshadowed an even greater chunk of the time she knew her father here on Earth, seven of the seventeen years she had with him.

Now, as I write this introduction, it has been a year and a half since Mike’s death, and I continue to reflect on his life, my life with him, and the impact of these experiences on my children. This processing, I imagine, will go on until my own last days. In the meantime, I am quite sure that witnessing the plight of my husband while struggling myself to stay rooted in my own identity, even with cancer lurking, looming, or sometimes screaming in my face, has made me, if nothing else, a woman who can empathize. Like many of the women in this study, I longed for *el estudio*, yet for my family, in the early days, this seemed my own private endeavor that would only serve to further cut me off from them. When Mike became ill, any desire on my part to continue my education seemed as superficial as a facelift, a middle-aged makeover for a woman who had inadequately planned her life and then bumped up against her husband’s misfortune.

Although the women in my study frequently received the full support of their families in their own educational endeavors, they suffered many other hardships as well as barriers to education that I have never known, such as poverty and homelessness, often with the insecurities and injustices that accompany an undocumented existence in the
U.S. I strongly identified with their strength in the face of these ruinous outside forces—the ones we can’t control, the run of bad luck, the hard times—that I saw these women face constantly, relentlessly. With my eyes wide open, I drew from their strength, the strength of immigrant women who battled adversity in their lives and exemplified for me how to do it in mine, at the same time consoling me, sharing their wisdom, their groundedness, their peace.

I am thus forever grateful, once again, to another group of immigrants, the women who participated in this study, who, this time in my adulthood, like those of my childhood and adolescence, helped make me who I am. I came to see the women’s rootedness and resilience as an incredible force woven into their core in part by the many upheavals their lives had wrought upon them, and to intensely admire these mamás, just as my grandmothers had revered two little old ladies back in Brooklyn.

In the chapters that follow, I explore what counts as parent participation and in whose eyes it is so counted. Especially focusing on seven of las mamás, the subjects of this study, I attempt to map out their ways with the printed word and views of parental participation, to see how their perspectives and practices converge and contrast with those of school administrators and teachers. I look at the interplay of print literacy and parent involvement practices, considering the possible effects of varying access to schooling and print literacy upon parents’ involvement.

Specifically, Chapter 2 reviews several bodies of literature that bear on this subject. I begin with a theoretical framework designed to reveal parental contributions, especially those provided by societally marginalized parents. I then look at theories of social and cultural capital and their bearing on parent involvement; ethnographies of Latin@s; and literacy theory, including adult literacy and family literacy. Chapter 3 details the methodological considerations and practices employed in this study, and formally spells out my research questions. Chapter 4 describes the focal site, Jefferson School, including its parent programs, as well as the involvement of the study’s focal participants and their families along with more peripheral participants.

After laying this groundwork, I present the study’s findings: Chapter 5 looks at literacy development both in the adult classes the mothers attended as well as in the homes I was able to observe. Chapter 6 looks at the mothers’ views of their parental involvement practices; while Chapter 7 examines the phenomenon of parental involvement generally, and the mothers’ activities specifically, as viewed from the vantage points of Jefferson teachers and administrators. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes with summary thoughts on parental literacy and involvement, on attempts to document their efforts—minimal or herculean, depending on one’s vantage point—as well as something of an epilogue.

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2 All names of places and persons studied in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

Porque yo quiero estudiar y pues otros me decían “no”….No, yo quiero estudiar [dije yo]. Entonces así me fui hasta que llegué a una persona [que me ayudara]. Como siempre les digo yo, hay que tocar puertas, porque siempre hay una que nos está esperando.

Because I want to go to school and, well, others told me “no”….No, I want to go to school [I said]. So, I went along like that until I found someone [who could help me]. As I always say, you have to knock on doors, because there’s always one that’s waiting for you.

—Alma Rivera

1. Introduction

A vital parent participant at Jefferson School, Alma Rivera was considered by many to be a school and community leader. That her words above convey such optimism and persistence despite a life of suffering gives just one indication as to why so many admired her. 1 As she relayed her words to me, Alma was recalling that, from the time she was a little girl in Mexico, she insisted she wanted to go to school, so much so, that she had to work her way through. Of course, in the United States, to which Alma later immigrated, “working your way through school” implies working your way through college. In Alma’s case, because her family was very poor and her father had died leaving the family with few resources, she had to work her way through grammar school, from the third to the sixth grade. Beyond that point, the hardships she endured prevented her from seeking further formal education.

I highlight here Alma’s words and actions because they contradict (along with scholars such as Moreno and Valencia, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; and Zentella, 2005a, 2005b) a common misconception in the U.S. that Latina and Latino parents, and more specifically, Mexican origin parents, supposedly do not value formal education. Asked simply to talk about her schooling experiences in Mexico, Alma made it very clear that she treasured educational opportunity at a very early age, a value further ingrained in every dish she washed and floor she swept in order to earn the necessary fees for school. Still, according to researchers (e.g., Lawrence Lightfoot, 1978; Moreno & Valencia, 2005), the myth that Latin@s and other societally marginalized groups do not care about their children’s education is reflected in a good deal of academic literature as well as negative press. In addition, high profile individuals, such as former U.S. Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Zentella, 2005a, 2005b) 2

1 For a full discussion of Alma Rivera’s background and those of all focal participants, see Chapters 4-6.
2 Cavazos downplayed such challenges as language and cultural barriers as well as economic difficulties in leveling most of the blame against Latin@ parents for the comparatively high dropout rate among Latin@ students (Valdés, 1996, following Suro, 1990).
and comedian Bill Cosby (M.E. Dyson, 2005), have fueled this myth, disparaging Latin@ and low-income African-American parents, respectively, claiming they do not adequately value education for their children. More generally speaking, while government and school officials have called for greater parent participation, they frequently feel that parents are not “pulling their weight” (Crozier & Reay, 2005:ix). Adding greater fuel to the fire, amidst the climate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), parents frequently are seen as ultimately responsible for their children’s performance in school, often as represented by children’s standardized test scores.

This study examines parent involvement, not by looking at test scores, but rather by focusing on Mexican immigrant mothers who participated in parent literacy programs at their children’s school. But what counts as parent involvement? We can’t answer that question without a clearly stated definition, but many studies assume narrow yet nebulous definitions and fail to acknowledge issues of power and voice in who defines parent participation and how it is defined (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Fine, 1993; Graue, Kroeger & Prager, 2001). Definitions aren’t born in a vacuum; they are based on attitudes arising from a convergence of contexts—social, cultural, economic, political, and historical—generally involving, stated or unstated, matters of race, class, gender, documentation status, use of language and literacy, and other sociocultural traits, practices, or circumstances (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Yosso, 2006). This chapter reflects upon the confluence of these forces and the perspectives produced therein, seeking, on the one hand, to expose unacknowledged assumptions and the flawed conclusions to which they can lead, and on the other, to suggest a more inclusive, effective framework for considering and valuing parent participation. In the sections that follow, I first construct a theoretical framework to serve as a heuristic for thinking about parents and schools—and their respective roles, duties, and patterns of participation—both as perceived by parents as well as other members of the larger society. I consider from within this framework the particular location of the Mexican immigrant mothers who are this study’s focal participants, hoping both to shed light upon how the aforementioned forces conspire to render these women and their diligent efforts essentially invisible within the dominant society, and to suggest a mechanism for broader, more productive consideration of parent participation for the wider spectrum of scholarly work on this topic. Next, I consider ethnographies of U.S. Latin@s and related literature. Many such studies have examined either cultural convergences or contrasts between Latin@s and the dominant society. Within this study’s theoretical framework, however, perceptions of similarity and difference are seen as cultural construal, arising in relation to one’s position in the societal field. This study thus considers the interpretation and interplay of both sociocultural convergences and contrasts. I then review the literature on parent involvement and adult and family literacy, maintaining this relational perspective.

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3 As widely reported in the U.S. press, at a May, 2004 gala dinner to commemorate the anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, comedian Cosby, himself the holder of a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts, “assailed poor black mothers and fathers for their horrible parenting skills, saying they buy their kids ‘$500 sneakers’ but refuse to ‘spend $250 on Hooked on Phonics’” (M.E. Dyson, 2005:xii).

4 I use the terms “parent involvement” and “parent participation” synonymously; see Chapter 7 for further details and a formal typology of parent involvement in focal parents’ terms.
2. Constructing a Theoretical Framework

In his quantitative meta-analysis on the effects of parental involvement among urban students, educational researcher William Jeynes (2005) concludes that parents’ most significant efforts are those that typically escape detection, namely, parental expectations and parenting style. More visible forms of aid or involvement, such as helping with homework or attending school meetings, do not significantly correlate with improved student performance in Jeynes’ (2005) study. Rather, it is largely invisible acts that lead to visible results. In addition, parents of societally marginalized status tend to be viewed, both in the literature as well as in the larger society, as “less involved.” As I will argue in this section, such parents are already largely invisible within the dominant society. In essence, they are invisible people doing invisible work. Further, the assumption that these parents are “less involved” recursively solidifies their marginalization, as it heightens their invisibility and obfuscates researchers’ and educators’ understanding of the parent involvement practices of poor, immigrant, minority, or otherwise subordinated members of society.

2.1 Intersectionality: Of Race, Class, and Women

In her work on violence against women of color, critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) elaborates a theory of “intersectionality,” which seeks to explain how identities involving race, class, and gender can intersect, conspiring against poor women of color in such a way that they may be especially depreciated and discarded, indeed, rendered invisible within society. Frequently, notes Crenshaw, dimensions such as race, class, and gender are viewed in isolation. As a result, “the particular values attached to them, and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies” (1995:375) cannot be fully understood. It is important to note, then, that the focal parents in this study—poor, immigrant, Latina women, some without documentation—experience minority status on several levels, or intersecting axes, within U.S. society. Any research that fails to acknowledge the confluence of effects generated by such multilevel, subordinated status will most likely in turn overlook similarly critical details in the lives of those so marginalized (Hidalgo, 1998). Of particular importance in studies of parent participation is to acknowledge at the forefront that parents subordinated in society frequently may be invisible to many, including the educators and researchers who proceed from that society. In a word, if intersectionality breeds invisibility, it is because privilege conspires in reverse, as in white privilege that blinds itself to the conditions of colored disadvantage, or middle class privilege that conceals the plight of the poor, or male privilege that ignores the struggles of women, or formally educated privilege that blinds its partakers to the intelligence of the uneducated, and so on. At the same time, at Crenshaw’s urging, researchers and educators must consider these avenues that blind society as an intersection or confluence, one with potentially exponential effects that render invisible the bearers of such societal labels.

A framework that acknowledges such blind spots from the outset likewise should seek to expose society’s authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981), such as stereotypes and myths (Freire, 1993; Hidalgo, 1998; Moreno & Valencia, 2002) that eclipse subordinated groups. At the same time, such a framework should attempt to reveal individuals’ agentic, internally persuasive discourses (Bakhtin, 1981), as well as seemingly minor acts that reflect a mere modicum of agency (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte & Cain, 1998), as these challenge societal assumptions and myths, appropriating certain discourses and re-
jecting others, in what Bakhtin (1981) identifies as a process of ideological becoming. If, as Bakhtin (1981, 1986) tells us, our words are not our own but rather refracted versions of the utterances of others, then research that recognizes blind spots, authoritative discourses, and internally persuasive discourses can go a long way toward exposing societal hierarchies and their reenactments in the field of daily life, as well as seemingly minor efforts to counter such hierarchies. Research that fails to do so risks the mere reassertion, in a tacit, unspoken form, of the marginalization it ignores.

As such, this study rests on a framework of acknowledged biases and efforts to move beyond them. Such a perspective finds it unhelpful at best, preposterous at worst, that any study of parent participation could be undertaken without input from the parents studied as to what such a concept could mean and how it is verbalized, viewed, and enacted. Without an emic perspective (Erickson, 1986), how else to learn how parents read their world and come to read new worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987)? How else to comprehend how they embody and enact, as in sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, cultural practices and societal rules, or how, in a process of being and becoming (Collins, 1977 following Freire, 1970), parents begin to understand what Bourdieu called the “rules of the game” (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; following Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992)? How else to understand parents’ interpretations of social and cultural rules, of the processes that legitimate or challenge these norms, and of players’ uniquely assumed roles, or positions, in the field? How else to understand the ways in which even poor, undocumented, immigrant, minority women seek to construct social networks and gain access to formal education—often previously denied—for themselves and their children, increasing their stores of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)? Immigrants’ efforts to gain a foothold in a new community or social milieu, as Valdés (1996) tells us, may or may not involve the cultural literacies and values from home. Rather, new communities will likely operate under a largely opaque set of rules that may only become clearer through processes of mentorship, brokering, social networking, or other sustained practices. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as a socioculturally situated practice, a process of “legitimate peripheral participation” through which “newcomers become part of a community of practice” (1991:29). Only by acknowledging blind spots and seeking to gain an emic foothold can researchers and educators hope to understand these processes and the people, rendered invisible, who undertake them.

2.2 From Intersectionality to Literacy and Identity

Identity shifts are expected as one begins to view oneself even as a legitimate peripheral participant, let alone a bona fide member, in a new community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Whether vis-à-vis a community of practice, such as a group of adult students focused on learning to work with print, or a broader, imagined community, such as an imagined community of print literates, there have to be epistemological and identity shifts in how practitioners view both themselves and others’ views of themselves, as part of an inclusionary and/or exclusionary process. In the specific case of adults or youth and print literacy, as researchers such as Kalman (2004a, 2004b) and Ferdman (1990, 1991) tell us, appropriating new literacies likewise involves accepting new identities.
At the same time, in the work of Kris Gutiérrez and her colleagues, we see that hybrid forms of expression and new identities can emerge from a confluence of cultures (sa. Anzaldúa, 1999 [1987]; Habell-Pallán, 2005, Moraga, 1993), just as expanding technologies likewise expand and evolve into newly coined literacies and identities (Gee, 2004; Mahiri, 2004). As I argue elsewhere (Miano, 2004), the ability to adapt to new, hybrid identities and literacies may itself be considered and examined as a literate practice. For the present study, as well as for studies that seek to make visible the invisible practices of invisible parents, this implies looking beyond conventional norms to hybrid cultural expressions, new ways of thinking, innovative approaches to print, and newly coined practices likely mixed with wise old folkways (cf. Valdés, 1996 following Williams, 1969 [1938]) and other cultural experiences wrought into new knowledge through personal, historical trajectories (Bakhtin, 1981; Hidalgo, 1998). If educators and researchers wish to gain insight into these processes, then Kalman’s (2004a, following Zboray, 1993) notion of a generative space for print literacy, indeed, as a generative space for hybrid literacies and the rich social and cultural interaction that these entail, is a propitious place to start.

Figure 2.1 attempts to schematically portray this theoretical framework. The framework locates its subjects—seven Mexican immigrant mothers who reside in the Silicon Valley, California—at the center point. Note that the framework assumes the mamás arrive in the U.S. with their own personal historical trajectories, as well as parent involvement practices and other forms of social and cultural capital that may or may not appear universally desirable in the host society. Note also that the mothers come to the U.S. with certain internally persuasive discourses about who they are, what they believe and value, and how they and their families are to act upon these beliefs and values in their new surroundings.

In adapting to their new surroundings, the mothers read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), gaining an understanding, based on their own social and cultural underpinnings, of this new society and its social components, namely, the field of play, the various players, and the rules of the game (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; following Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This field, at the outer rim of Figure 2.1, includes various self-perpetuating, authoritative discourses and myths that permeate the society and shape the ways that others, including those of privilege and power, view the mamás. These discourses and myths entwine and intersect, depreciating and devaluing the mothers as outsiders, relegating them to marginal—not central—positions, where they may be rendered anonymous and invisible.

While this framework acknowledges the multidimensional nature of the mothers’ marginalized status and of intersectional invisibility, it is an interpretive, emic framework that relocates the mothers away from society’s margins—and likewise away from its prescriptions—placing the mamás, their perspectives and practices at the center. From such a vantage point, the mothers’ parent participation activities, social networking, and literacy development, processes that constitute and contribute to their ongoing acquisition of social and cultural capital, can be viewed on the mothers’ own terms. As such, the question of “Whose culture has capital?” (Yosso, 2006) can begin to be answered in ways that acknowledge yet transcend the societal blind spots that too often find their way into research conclusions as well. Similarly, by viewing parent involvement as a form of social capital that essentially all parents, by virtue of their parenthood, possess, then the ques-
tion surrounding the nature of parent involvement capital can rest on an assumption of abundance, instead of deficit, and this presumption can in turn lead us to ask not *whether* or *how much* certain racial, social, and/or gender, etc., groups participate, but rather *how*. I now turn to theories of cultural and social capital, and their role in studies of parent involvement.

Figure 2.1
2.3 Theories of Cultural and Social Capital

Researchers increasingly have looked to theories of social and/or cultural capital to examine school, family, and community influences in children’s education. According to Dika and Singh (2002) in a review of dozens of studies of social capital effects upon educational outcomes, those researchers particularly interested in formal schooling as a reproductive mechanism of social inequity (cf. Lareau, 2000, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001) have tended to look to the theorizing of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on social and cultural capital (1977, 1979, 1980, 1985, 1991, 1993, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In contrast, researchers wishing to concentrate on the role of family and parental involvement have tended to look to the work of American sociologist James Coleman (Dika and Singh, 2002). Before discussing the use of social and cultural capital theories in education, then, a comparison of Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s respective work is in order.

As noted by Portes (1998), Bourdieu was the first to develop a theory of social, cultural and other forms of capital, elaborated through several concepts that seek to illustrate the dynamics of social reproduction. Broadly speaking, Bourdieu (1977, 1990) lays out a framework that acknowledges and examines both objective realities and the subjective orientations that we perceive and act upon (Postone, LiPuma & Calhoun, 1993). Bourdieu brings together these (and other) apparent theoretical oppositions through three key concepts: habitus, capital, and field (Postone, LiPuma & Calhoun, 1993). The first of these, habitus, is an inculcated, embodied, internalized form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000), a set of “durable dispositions” that “incline agents to act and react in certain ways” (Thompson, 1991:12), a “system of structured, structuring dispositions…always oriented toward practical functions” (Bourdieu, 1990:52). The habitus, then, both inculcated and inculcating through sociocultural practice, “governs practice in a subconscious, unreflective manner” (Brubaker, 1993:225), in a way so completely natural and obvious to those so inclined that these dispositions appear unremarkable and above question.

The second concept, capital, comes in several, sometimes overlapping forms, principally: cultural, symbolic, social, and economic. In a brief epistemological preliminary, Bourdieu (1979) defines cultural capital in a tripartite fashion as: (1) embodied (“incorporé”), as in the “durable dispositions” outlined above, which he later came to call the habitus; (2) objectified (“objectifié”), i.e., cultural objects or possessions (e.g., artwork, appliances, etc., or, as in the tools associated with schooling, books, school supplies, desks, computers, and the like), and (3) institutionalized (“institutionnalisé”), as in educational background, titles, or credentials. The latter of these may also be considered a form of symbolic capital, although Bourdieu’s view of this form of capital is characteristically much broader and more powerful than mere credentials. Symbolic capital, says Bourdieu (2000), is evident in struggles for social recognition and can be positive, as in forms of social prestige or honor, or negative, as in forms of social stigmatism, such as racism, elitism, or other forms of social dishonor or enactments of inequity.

Social capital (Bourdieu, 1980, 1986, 1990) meanwhile, is defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986:248). In other words, social capital consists of network alliances forged to provide members with access to resources. In fact, as explained by Portes
(1998), group solidarity arises in these networks precisely because of the implicit re-
source potential that network members perceive to be at their disposal, a potential that
stems from “the fungibility of different forms of capital and…the ultimate reduction of
all forms to economic capital, defined as accumulated human labor” (Portes, 1998:4). As
such, to continue with Portes’ analysis, social capital, can be activated and exchanged for,
e.g.,
- economic capital (e.g., access to scholarships, subsidized loans, investment
advice),
- embodied cultural capital (e.g., associations with sophisticates, spe-
cialists, and professionals), or
- institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., academic degrees or creden-
tials).

Further, note that the fungibility described by Portes works in multiple directions.
Thus, for example, those who enact certain manners of habitus, such as displays of cul-
tural knowledge, language usage, artistic preferences, etc., “spontaneously inclined to
recognize all the expressions in which they recognize themselves” (Bourdieu, 1990:108),
are more inclined to associate with one another, to recognize the resource potential in
each other, and to form social capital through mutual linkages. Conversely, individuals
whose habitus is not similarly inscribed may find themselves excluded from such net-
works. In Bourdieuan theory, then, the possession and activation of capital can multiply,
but only amongst those so endowed and inclined, thus concretizing and reproducing so-
cial inequity.

Also of great importance in the work of Bourdieu (1990, 1991, 1993, 2000; Bour-
dieu & Wacquant, 1992), though frequently neglected in the literature applying his theo-
ries to education (Lareau, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), is the foregrounding of habitus
against the backdrop of a rule-governed field of interaction. The relation between habitus
and field, or rather, “between incorporated [embodied] history and an objectified history”
(Bourdieu, 1980:66), indicates that as individuals we embody and possess certain forms
of capital, but that we are also located within a certain field, which Bourdieu likens to a
game board. Within that field, just like a game piece, we occupy certain positions de-
dpending upon the capital we possess and our ability to activate that capital (Lareau &
Horvat, 1999). As Lareau and Horvat are careful to point out, however, many parent par-
ticipation studies using a social or cultural capital framework have failed to acknowledge
that the habitus is foregrounded against this backgrounded field “shaped by multiple, in-
teracting forces, including the rules governing the field and the relative position of pla-
yers in the field” (1999:39). Often, these scholars note, such studies have sought merely to
quantify the value of isolated social or cultural variables without regard to the field of
play, i.e., the social context of these variables, and the various positions of relative power
or powerlessness that different players occupy within the field. The result, they say, has
been to misuse the notion of cultural capital as a tool of cultural deficit. Unlike Bourdieu,
such studies do not recognize the positions of dominance or disadvantage held by various
players in an uneven field, nor do they recognize the dominant society’s arbitrary as-
signment of value to certain forms of capital over others.

Many researchers, in fact, have tended to overlook Bourdieu’s more complex theory
and relied instead on Coleman’s (1987, 1988) more limited view of social capital and
family background (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998). For Coleman (1988), “family background” is essentially derived from three forms of capital: financial (family income), human (parental educational level), and social (familial and community relational networks). In contrast to Bourdieu, Coleman hone in on specific indicators of social capital from two principal categories, family structure and parent-child interaction (Dika & Singh, 2002). A likely beacon for many quantitative studies of parent involvement, Coleman (1988), for instance, examines decontextualized variables—two parents at home, fewer siblings, high parental expectations, and family social capital—in using the national High School and Beyond (HSB) data set to link greater amounts of social capital to lower high school dropout rates. Coleman (1987, 1988) examines family social capital through a property he refers to as “intergenerational closure” in social networks, which consists, essentially, of the networking among parents that allows them to monitor each other’s children. But the HSB data set does not directly measure intergenerational closure, so Coleman (1988) instead employs HSB data related to family mobility, arguing that a family’s social network is broken down if children are forced to change schools due to a family move. In sum, while Coleman’s theory provides some explanatory power, its focus on family ignores various other structural aspects related to school and society. Moreover, although Bourdieu’s theory encompasses a broad range of social effects—from family to school and community to the broader society—his theory has been less often invoked by educational researchers seeking explanations through social and/or cultural capital theories (Dika & Singh, 2002).

Encouragingly, some more recent studies attempt to address the complexity; unfortunately, however, they continue to suffer from narrow yet unstated, merely implicit notions of parent involvement. Marjoribanks (2003), for example, invokes Bourdieu, Coleman, Max Weber, and several others in constructing a theory of family and school capital. Still, despite the density of its theoretical review, this composite study arrives at comparatively basic conclusions, such as the supposed universal utility of parent involvement. Likewise, Lee and Bowen (2003) invoke Bourdieu in addition to Coleman in their survey of parent and teacher responses regarding over 400 third- to fifth-grade children in the southeastern U.S. Similarly, however, despite an intricate theoretical overview, this study’s limited view of parent involvement engenders conclusions that do little more than confirm the existence of educational inequity and presume lower levels of involvement amongst African-American, Latin@, and low-income parents. Indeed, as concluded by Turney and Kao in their comparative quantitative study of immigrant parents, based on a national data base,

...our index of parental involvement does not capture all of the potential ways in which parents may be involved in their children's schooling. Our analyses show that minority immigrant parents were less likely to make connections
with their children's school, but these parents may have different ways of
demonstrating their commitment to their children's education. (2009:268)

Turney and Kao, in fact, following Domina (2005) and others, provide a thoughtful
framework in which parent involvement itself is seen as a form of social capital:

… there are at least three mechanisms through which children can benefit
[from parent involvement], as articulated by Domina (2005). First, parental
involvement socializes children; parents who are involved send a message to
their children that education is important, and these children are more likely to
value education themselves. Second, parental involvement provides parents
with a means of social control; involved parents get to know other parents,
teachers, and administrators who may then discuss their children's perform-
ance with them. Last, involved parents are privy to information about their
children; if teachers tell parents their children are struggling, parents are in a
better position to intervene. (2009:258)

Seen in this light, parent involvement socializes children and networks parents in
ways that can ultimately help the child. Turney and Kao likewise provide useful findings,
e.g., that immigrant parents of various ethnic backgrounds report greater barriers to
school involvement than their native-born European-American counterparts. Still, as
these researchers admit above—in a way too rarely seen—their study bears limitations in
describing the scope and nature of parent involvement practices that transcend the norma-
tive constructions typically built into the surveys whose data are culled for quantitative
analyses. Likewise scant, in this case, is any description of the specific nature of the “ba-
rriers” that immigrant parents face. With such limitations, qualitative inquiry and ethn-
ographic work denote a promising trend for expanding conceptualizations of theories of
capital (Dika & Singh, 2002). As such, I now look at the ethnographies and related litera-
ture on U.S. Latin@s that have helped lay the groundwork for the present study.

3. Literature Review
3.1 Ethnographies of Latin@s in the U.S.

Sofía Villenas and Richard Foley (2002) provide a detailed history of Chi-
can@/Latin@ critical ethnography, from its roots in colonial times (Trueba, 1999), to the
backlash against deficit theories, to postmodernist border theories. As these scholars note,
much research has emerged to counter myths of cultural deficiency among minority stud-
Menchaca, 1997; and Foley, 1997) and likewise to bring to light within the academic liter-
ature many communities’ rich social, cultural, and linguistic practices. With respect to
Latin@s specifically, much scholarship has supported the recognition and appreciation of
Latin@ social and cultural values (e.g., Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2001;
and sociolinguistic sophistication (e.g., Elias-Olivares, 1976, 1995; Guerra, 1998; Huerta-
Macías, 1981; Sánchez, 1983; Valdés, 1982, 2003; Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon,
Additionally, research treating *la frontera*, or borderlands, note Villenas and Foley, has explored the complexities and power struggles of U.S.-Mexican border crossings of all kinds—social, cultural, linguistic, nationalistic, and gender-based (as in, e.g., Anzaldúa, 1999 [1987]; González, 1999; Guerra, 1998; Limón, 1982; Moraga, 1993; Saldívar, 1997; Vila, 2000). This literature not only depicts the enmeshment of border crossings and cultural contacts, but also at times emulates it with linguistic border crossings, i.e., code-switching, revealing new language forms. Villenas and Foley celebrate this literature as

…the ultimate of postmodernisms….the present and future way of being in the world—of juggling cultures and embracing ambiguity, struggle, and solidarities across heterogeneities, while rejecting modernist nationalisms even as we live under modernist oppressions. (2002:201)

For Villenas and Foley, the postmodern stance of *la frontera* portends a future of great promise, realized through hybrid identities articulated through new forms of linguistic and cultural expression, even in the face of racism, oppression and other dominant discourses.

3.1.1 Research Trends: Convergences, Contrasts, and Hybrid Forms

Frequently, the literature on Latin@s has highlighted convergences and contrasts between Latin@s and the dominant U.S. society. Juan Guerra (1998), for instance, found convergences in the discourse practices among members of a transnational Mexican social network in Chicago. He writes that this social network, consisting of a tight-knit, extended family, based both in Chicago and in the family’s rural town in Mexico, specifically emphasized five rhetorical elements in the art of conversation: “*gracia* (grace or wit), *labia*, (eloquence), *sabor* (flavor), *emoción* (emotion), and *sinceridad* (sincerity)” (1998:73). Interestingly, he notes that these correspond closely to Aristotle’s *pistis* for effective rhetoric: *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (attention to audience). At the same time, however, Guerra notes that members of the network, in contrast to many formal educators in the U.S., valued the emotive over the logical in effective communication.

Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, and Shannon (1994), likewise explore areas of convergence in cultural practice. They note, for example, that among the working-class Mexican families they studied in a Northern California city, study participants did not reject assimilatory practices such as learning English. Rather, family members frequently pooled together resources to create strategies for handling the linguistic and cultural challenges often faced in unfamiliar settings. Despite such challenges, however, Vásquez and her colleagues found similarities in language use across cultural contexts. That is, like Anglo parents, the parents in this study frequently engaged in language enhancing practices: they asked their children for clarification and elaboration, and provided children with linguistic cues and hints when deemed necessary. Parents likewise accommodated their speech to their children’s developmental levels and also provided children with supportive experiences (such as trips to the library) and materials (such as crayons and paper). While Vásquez and her colleagues do not discuss the origins of these practices, they emphasize that cultural convergence is an area of study that merits further attention.
And yet clear cultural contrasts exist both between Latin@s and the dominant U.S. society, and amongst Latin@s themselves, whose cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity defies essentialization (Zentella, 2005b). With respect to U.S. Latin@s and the larger society, often, the literature has pointed out breeches of understanding between Latin@ culture as reflected in the home and the dominant school culture. In reflecting on her Puerto Rican and Mexican roots and upbringing in the South Bronx, UC San Diego ethnic studies professor Ana Celia Zentella writes:

When I was a child, I thought my mother invented Scrabble because she cut paper bags into squares and wrote a letter of the alphabet on each; we sat on the floor and put words together. *Mami* also had me copy and memorize long poems in Spanish and English, which I recited to visitors and at my father’s Mexican society’s *veladas* (cultural soirées), where I learned formal Spanish by imitating the guest speakers. My teachers never knew that I had those abilities, and I doubt they would have judged me college material if they had heard *mami*'s rants against too much reading and reliance on books. (2005b:27)

Thus, Professor Zentella, while noting supporting family literacy practices such as playing scrabble, reciting poetry in two languages, and gaining exposure to formal registers, also notes that these practices went undetected by her teachers. In fact, says Zentella, in contrast to the dominant society and her teachers, her mother saw too much book learning as an undesirable, probable source of parroting:

Whenever teachers told *mami* I had a high IQ, she would rephrase that concept in her inimitable way: “Yes,” she would say, “she has plenty of ICE CUBES, but they are melting in her brain because she has no common sense.” *Mami* distrusted IQ scores and book learning and favored common sense and creativity, especially being, as she pronounced it, “oriyinal” (original). All her life, if I happened to say something she considered on target or insightful, she would demand: “¿Eso es tuyo, o te lo leíste en algún libro?” (Is that your own [idea], or did you read it in a book?) It just didn’t count as much if it wasn’t “oriyinal.” (2005b:15, emphasis in the “oriyinal”)

Similarly, Valdés (1996) documented contrasting values on the part of ten Mexican origin families in greater El Paso, TX and the Anglo-dominated schools their children attended. Above all, says Valdés, these families sought to instill in their children the cultural value of respect, *el respeto*. This value “involved both the presentation of the self before others as well as a recognition and acceptance of the needs of those persons with whom interactions took place” (Valdés, 1996:132). To demonstrate respect, says Valdés, is to understand and properly enact the social roles that must be assumed in any given interaction. Indeed, such social intelligence cannot be cultivated from mere book learning, if at all, and similarly to Zentella’s mother, the families in Valdés’ study did not assume that book smarts were equivalent to intelligence.

Likewise, Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap and Epstein (1995), speaking of Puerto Rican families residing in the U.S., point to the value of responsibility and loyalty to family and friends: “Inner self-worth and sense of integrity come from doing what is expected, espe-
cially with regard to family obligations” (1995:502). The oft-repeated saying, “Hoy por ti, mañana por mí” (‘Today for you, tomorrow for me’), they say, depicts the selflessness and reciprocity expected among Puerto Rican families. And Delgado-Gaitán (2001) finds similar values reflected among the Mexican immigrant parents in her study in Carpinteria, California, where interdependence and cooperation are likewise valued over individualism, individual competition, and independence. Interestingly, these traditional Latin@ values were decried by Harvard sociologist Samuel Huntington as part of a cluster of “central Hispanic traits (different from Anglo-Protestant ones) that ‘hold…Latinos back,,’” (2004:254), even while educators in the U.S. increasingly applaud a similar value, “cooperative learning.” Convergences and contrasts, then, despite appearances, are not static but remain in the eyes of the beholder, permeated with racial, social, and gendered overtones. As such, in this dissertation, I adopt the view that one person’s convergence may be another’s contrast, or flip sides of the same coin, and thus I attempt to look at both convergences as contrasts not as static entities but rather as perspectives, Bakhtinian refractions, if you will, often of the same phenomenon.

In addition to examinations of cultural convergences and contrasts, scholarship on Latin@s has increasingly looked at expansive, hybrid cultural forms and identities (cf. Habell-Pallán, 2005). The influence of Chicana feminist writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, for instance, mixing prose and poetry in Spanish and English while affirming their hybrid identities as gendered, racialized lesbian mestiza women, has, no doubt, helped inspire researchers in education and literacy studies, where theorists have revisited their thinking on the nature of social boundaries and cultural crossings, on hegemonic discourses and other sociocultural practices that affirm or attack the construction of boundaries (Villenas & Foley, 2002).

In studies in literacy and education, Kris Gutiérrez, for instance, has explored notions of a classroom “underlife,” where unscripted student dialogue thrives beyond the teacher’s authoritative gaze (Gutiérrez & Larson, 1995; Gutiérrez, Larson & Kreuter, 1995); of a “third space,” in which teacher and students together engage in unscripted, often conflictual yet collaborative and fruitful dialogue (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejada, 1999); and in hybrid language use (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López &Tejada,, 2001) and other hybrid cultural expressions that “animate third spaces” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejada, 1999:291). As Gutiérrez and her colleagues note, literacies flourish when they find safe haven in these “third spaces.” In contrast, if teachers use their authority to shut down unscripted student inquiries, students may lose opportunities to develop new or enhance existing literacies and to strengthen their developing identities. Much research, in fact, about U.S. Latin@s, both immigrant and native-born, stresses the importance of bicultural identity and expression as a basis for academic success (Valenzuela, 1999; Garcia, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and psychosocial well-being (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

3.1.2 Latin@ Parent Involvement and Literacy: Diversity that Defies Essentialization

It bears emphasizing that diversity among U.S. Latin@s varies widely in terms of any number of factors, including:

- race
- ethnicity
- cultural origins (Latin America includes 18 Spanish-speaking countries as well
as Puerto Rico, each with its own racial, ethnic, and/or indigenous groups and respective histories of immigration)⁵

- birthplace (U.S. born or immigrant)
- documentation status
- age at time of immigration (if immigrant)
- generations in U.S. (first-, second-, third-, fourth-generation or higher)
- linguistic tendencies (monolingual in Spanish or English, bilingual and Spanish dominant, bilingual and English dominant, etc.)
- socioeconomic status
- formal educational attainment (in the U.S. and/or abroad)
- political affiliations, etc.

As such, any attempt to characterize Latin@ parents, or even Latin@ immigrant parents, in a single brush stroke is futile. Indeed, among the seven Mexican immigrant mothers who served as focal subjects for this study, there was a great deal of diversity, including urban versus rural background, age, number of years in the U.S., and access to formal education and to print literacy. Effective studies of Latin@ parents, then, have first sought clearly to delineate the populations under study. Second, they have likewise rejected the fallacious yet persistent belief, as cited by Stanton-Salazar, “that Latino children perform poorly in school because, in part, Latino parents are ambivalent or uncaring about education” (2001:81). Lastly, they have avoided essentializing Latin@s as well as subgroups of the U.S. Latin@ population (Zentella, 2005b).

With respect to parent involvement, several studies report college aspirations on the part of Mexican origin and other Latin@ parents (e.g., López, 2001; Moreno and Valencia, 2002:237, quoting Immerwahr and Foleno, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Other studies have looked at frequently unacknowledged but nevertheless helpful child-rearing practices (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1992; Valdés, 1996, Zentella, 2005b), role-modeling and advice giving (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; López, 2001; Valdés, 1996), and language socialization practices (Bhimji, 2005; Vásquez et al., 1994) that can contribute to children’s success in school. Still others have looked at Latin@ parents’ participation in school and community action programs (Delgado-Gaitán, 1996, 2001; Foley, 1990) and political involvement in litigation, legislation, and other forms of civic activism for the purpose of improving educational access for Latin@ and other minority children (Moreno & Valencia, 2002). Indeed, political activism is a form of parental involvement frequently ignored in most parent involvement studies, despite the sustained contributions of African Americans and Latin@s, from the times of Méndez v. Westminster, precursor to Brown v. Board of Education, to the protests of today against school closures and cutbacks. In short, Latin@ parents, much research tells us, have contributed widely to their children’s education, both within the home and in the broader community, despite the persistent view within the dominant society and in some research that this may not be the case.

If cultural frustrations and misperceptions exist at the societal level, so, too, do they

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⁵ Although immigrants from Equatorial Guinea (West Africa) and Spain (Europe) also speak Spanish, I do not include them here, as they are not of Latin American origin. Still, as racialized, Spanish-speaking immigrants in the U.S., they undoubtedly share certain prejudicial social constructions or labels with their counterparts of Latin American origin.
exist among differing cultural mores (Valdés, 1996), and extending into micro level interactions (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Valdés, 1996). Valdés, for instance, documenting the values Mexican origin border families in El Paso, describes a landscape in which parents’ main goal was to raise responsible, moral human beings; these parents did not view themselves as the “adjunct schoolteachers” (1996:166) that their children’s schools unquestioningly expected. At the micro level, there were many misunderstandings, as when teachers sent home impersonal notes or inexplicable report cards, or when mothers sent word to teachers through oral messages to be delivered by a student’s older sibling, an apparently unacceptable conduit to teachers (Valdés, 1996). And if home-school communications are imperfect at best, there is likewise little agreement as to the role of parents with respect to homework. Even among researchers sympathetic to parents with limited access to formal education or print literacy, there seems to be a lamentation among some (e.g., Stanton-Salazar, 2001), perhaps reflective of an attitude held by some parents themselves, that these parents cannot help their children with their homework. The assumption appears to be that parents must somehow pick up the slack when children find their homework difficult to understand. Indeed, as scholastic demands on children increase and even formally educated parents cannot cope with the challenges of homework, the privileged have increasingly sought private tutors and counselors to help their children succeed in school and apply to college. If public schools and programs fail to pick up the slack for their less privileged students, then certainly the historic limited access of poor and minority students to educational opportunity will only widen, and the middle class will likely continue to point the finger at supposed “inattentive,” “uninvolved,” and “uncaring” parents among the less privileged. The contributions from Latin@, immigrant, and other parents from subordinated groups will thus continue to be discounted or overlooked in mainstream educational literature and within the dominant society, unless we academics, at least, shift our point of reference.

3.2 Parent Involvement and Home-School Relations

Inspired by the analysis of Graue et al. (2001), I identify three principal strands within the literature on parent involvement and home-school relations: (1) a prescriptive strand devoted principally to advising teachers and schools on how to engage with parents and direct parents to work with their children; (2) a quantitative strand largely dedicated to pinpointing ostensibly beneficial and/or unhelpful parental behaviors, often linking these to social variables such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class; and (3) an interpretive strand, critical of the previous two, aimed at documenting parent participation activities through qualitative research, typically avoiding prejudgments as to what cultural behaviors may or may not be supportive. Important constructs, particularly for the latter two strands, are the theories of social and cultural capital of Bourdieu (1977, 1979, 1980, 1985, 1991, 1993, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and Coleman (1987, 1988) outlined above. I highlight these strands and theories to

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Graue et al. (2001) contrasts “prescriptive/descriptive perspectives” on home-school relations with “interpretive/critical perspectives.” But I find little that is “descriptive” within the prescriptive literature, and certainly not from the ethnographic standpoint of Geertz’s “thick description” (1973, following the notion of British philosopher Gilbert Ryle). In addition, I highlight separately a tendency in the quantitative literature to mimic the assumptions of the prescriptive literature.
both to illustrate their prevalence and to situate my own thinking within the perspective of third, interpretive strand and its critical stance, along the social and cultural capital theory elaborated by Bourdieu.

3.2.1 The Prescriptive Parent Involvement Strand

The parent involvement literature’s prescriptive strand (e.g., Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996; Dauber & Epstein, 2001 [1993]; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Edwards, 2004; Epstein 1994, 1996, 2001, 2002; and Swap, 1987, 1993), largely dedicated to advising teachers on how to work with parents, has tended to rest on the foundational perspective of the affluent, European-American middle class and the institutional perspective of the school (de Carvalho, 2001; Graue et al., 2001, Lareau, 1996, 2000, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996). It asks, “how can schools help all families conduct the activities that will benefit their children?” (Epstein, 1994:213, emphasis removed), which implies an authoritative role on the part of schools and a submissive role on the part of parents, in a unidirectional flow of information and influence from school to home. Framing parental involvement as a “safety net” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001:7) and calling families and schools “partners in prevention of school failure for children” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001:7), this outlook shifts responsibility for children’s educational success or failure away from schools toward the less distinct domain of family-school relations. As declared by Susan Swap, who directed the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Wheelock College in Boston until her death in 1995, “When our focus is on improving the achievement of children at academic risk, partnership with families is not just useful—it is crucial” (1993:1). Swap notes, “Children of color, recent immigrants, and children living below the poverty line are more likely to experience low academic achievement” (1993:1), and she and others view parent involvement as the antidote for “this challenge to our schools” (1993:2).

Included in this perspective are unquestioned yet endemic assumptions. As noted by several researchers, including researchers from within this strand (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey, Walkier, Sandler, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005), as well as those representing alternative, critical perspectives (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; de Carvalho, 2001; Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1996, 2000, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996), parent involvement is assumed to be universally positive, despite evidence to the contrary (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Laureau, 1994). In addition, the prescriptive literature has tended to suppose, as documented by critical research (Auerbach, 1989; de Carvalho, 2001; Valdés, 1996), that “learning at home” by and large ought to mirror learning at school; that “effective communication” channels, generally assumed to be unidirectional, will differ little with respect to each family, especially within a given social group; and that the various forms of capital possessed by more affluent parents and communities will lead, to a great extent, to better prepared students, as when Coleman asserts that “parents’ education…provides the potential for a cognitive environment for the child that aids learning” (1988:S109).

As such, the prescriptive strand (and likewise in the quantitative strand, as discussed below) exhibits a tendency to tacitly base perceptions of effective parent involvement upon the educational background and sociocultural practices of the privileged, and then to assume that this background necessarily begets better-equipped parents and thus better-prepared children (de Carvalho, 2001). Dauber and Epstein’s conclusion that “par-
ents who are better educated are more involved at school and at home than parents who are less educated" (2001: 211 [1995]), appears to stem from such circular reasoning. Because formal education has so far been preferentially accessible to the European-American middle class, such statements privilege this group at the expense of others, with the unfortunate effect of casting prejudgment upon the marginalized parents whom this literature commendably wishes to address. Such assumptions propagate the myth—and I argue that this is a myth—that a parent’s relative access or limited access to formal education necessarily renders a parent more or less fit, respectively, to encourage and support his or her children’s schooling. The unwitting engagement in such mythmaking, a form of stereotyping based on a presumption of deficit, only perpetuates itself and tends to render invisible to researchers, educators, and the society at large the many ways in which parents of varying backgrounds—racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, educational, etc.—support their children’s school efforts (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valdés, 1996).

Ironically, from tacitly suggesting that parents with little or no formal education are less effective parent participants, the prescriptive literature paradoxically concludes that in low-income and working class communities, in which access to formal education historically has been structurally limited, parent involvement is the ideal remedy to fill the gap in material resources experienced in these communities. That is, the assumption is that parent involvement will somehow advantage the disadvantaged (as in Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2002; Swap, 1993). The prescriptive literature, then, would appear to overlook the illogicality of its own conclusion that parent involvement is superior in those communities set up as the norm for this phenomenon, and that boosting the undefined and supposedly lacking parent involvement in poor and working class communities is a definitive prescription for the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic imbalances endemic in U.S. schools and in U.S. life (de Carvalho, 2001; Graue et al., 2001, Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996). This line of thinking glosses over the role of societal forms of difference, more narrowly focusing on parents, families, or communities and ignoring the contextual effects exerted by the school as well as the dominant society (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Fine, 1993; Hidalgo, 1998; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Vincent, 1996). At the same time, this literature also tends to overlook the value of alternative forms of capital and positive family attributes acknowledged elsewhere (cf. Garcia, 2001; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; López, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Valdés, 1996; Villenas & Foley, 2002; Yosso, 2006).

Additionally, efforts to promote “partnerships” between parents and schools (cf. Comer, Haynes & Joyner, 1996; Epstein 1994, 1996, 2001, 2002; Moles, 1996; Swap, 1993) have overlooked the imbalance of power inherent in these relationships (de Carvalho, 2001; Graue et al. 2001; Fine, 1993; Vincent, 1996). For instance, Swap (1993) commends a parent program in a low-income, African-American community in Chicago, in which a committee of parents and school officials

…drafted a staff-parent-child contract to be followed during the school year. Parents pledged such things as working for the highest goals within the child’s reach, providing a quiet, well-lighted place for regular study, encouraging the child by talking with him or her daily, offering compliments on progress, and cooperating with the teacher on school work, discipline, and attendance. (Swap, 1993:6-7)
The original text of the study cited by Swap (Walberg, Bole & Waxman, 1980) reads as follows:

The [staff-parent committees] drafted and revised a staff-parent-child contract to be followed during the school year. The district superintendent, principal, and classroom teacher signed the contract. The parents signed a pledge on the contract to: work for the highest goals within the child’s reach; provide wholesome food, appropriate school clothing, and a quiet, well-lighted place for regular study; encourage the child daily by talking with him (or her) and complimenting him on his school progress and helping him to think well of himself; show him how to care for and use his books; and cooperate with the teacher in his school work, discipline, and attendance. On the same contract, each child signed a pledge to work daily to improve his school achievement. Less than 1% of the children had unsigned contracts. (1980:510)

On the surface, this “contract” may seem like an innocuously good idea, but it is based on flawed, even insulting, tacit assumptions and stereotypes. First, the contract supposes a social deficit on the part of parents in this low-income, African-American community, assuming they must sign a contract if they are to hold high goals for their children, talk to them, or discipline them. The contract thus reflects, albeit in less provocative terms, the same stereotype more recently verbalized by comedian Bill Cosby (see fn. 3). Further, neither Swap nor the original study make mention of any contract provisions that the teachers, principal, or superintendent involved might similarly have been required to fulfill: it bears asking whether any in the educational establishment pledged in kind to provide, for example, clean, well-lighted classrooms and facilities; up-to-date textbooks; information on resources to help financially strapped parents obtain the requisite food and clothing for their children; and certified, qualified teachers for all students. As such, this study, citing only the requirements of parents and not of schools, reflects a highly imbalanced “partnership.”

In fact, although some programs purport to involve parents in “meaningful roles pertinent to the functioning of the school” (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996:47), such programs may tend to envision “partnerships” in which the school is a principal beneficiary and fail to consider parents’ own needs or goals (Fine, 1993: Vincent, 1996). What is “meaningful” for the school is assumed to hold similar import for parents, who are lured in to a supposed “power-neutral partnership” (Fine, 1993:682). As such, instead of asking

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7 Note also that Lareau (1996, 2001) discusses important differences between school (middle-class) and working class families’ practices regarding discipline.

8 In addition, compare what Swap (1993), writing more than a decade later, omitted in describing the study of Walberg and colleagues (1980). First, Swap’s work leaves out any mention of school officials likewise signing the contract, entirely reducing the school’s obligations to the realm of the unstated. Likewise removed is the reference to parental obligations to provide nutritious food and appropriate clothing for their children, suggesting that such requirements, comparatively effortless for middle class parents, do not align with Swap’s (albeit unstated) definition of parent involvement. This omission likewise ignores the question as to whether schools should pledge to help parents locate community resources that can help families, through times of struggle, to hold on to basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter.
parents how they (schools) might, e.g., assist in parental goals, such as professional development or lifelong learning, parents are instead exhorted to, e.g., provide lessons at home, join the school site council, aid in the annual fundraiser, or supply a depleted school staff with photocopying services. In short, schools have become increasingly needy and, it has been argued, increasingly ineffectual, and parents have been called in to fix the problem (Fine, 1993).

In fact, emblematic of much of prescriptive strand, the focus is on what the home can do for the school, and not in turn what the school can do for the home. At the same time, this literature generally assumes a uniformity of resources across various social boundaries—family, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, etc.—believing, as in the study of Walberg and colleagues (1980) above, that all families can unproblematically provide food and clothing for their children. Alternatively, as in the claims of Cavazos and Cosby, this line of thinking tends to lay blame upon parents who may already be burdened by limited access to material resources (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). In the words of one researcher, “The dominant discourse blames the victims of persistent inequality for their own suffering, suggesting that a moral poverty brings about their social and economic problems” (Colomb, 2002:49).

In short, based on flawed input, in this case, on tendencies that include stereotyping, deficit thinking, and mythmaking (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997) much academic literature has, aided by the media, inadvertently helped promote the truism that Latin@, immigrant, and other societally subordinated parents do not sufficiently support their children’s education (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valencia & Black, 2002). The unstated foundation for this strand of the literature, then, undermines its apparent purpose, to help all children succeed in school despite the unevenness of society’s playing field. Indeed, certain claims in the prescriptive literature may not overtly marginalize based on race or social class but still single out parents with limited access to formal education, whose numbers are greater along our society’s margins, where African Americans, Latin@s, the poor and working class, immigrants, and others more frequently reside. Mythologizing that more formally educated parents necessarily are better, more effective parent participants (cf. Dauber & Epstein, 2001; Hidalgo et al., 1995) would appear to write off the less formally educated, whose numbers are greater along society’s margins, before these parents even get a foot in the schoolhouse door.

The prescriptive strand’s narrow foundation has tended to obscure some of the more productive contributions emerging from this strand, discussed below, which frequently receive much less attention than recommendations easily translated into “action items” for schools. Thus, reflecting European-American middle-class privilege, this literature insists that parents provide a quiet, well-lit place to study and that they review children’s homework. Teachers, for their part, should initiate communication with parents, providing “clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions” (Epstein, 2001:14). But just where must this “quiet place for study” reside? Must it be in the home, or will a school or public library suffice? And what does it mean to “review homework,” and is it a necessity for all children? Should parents merely check for homework completion, or should they tutor or coach? Further, what is the role in homework checking for parents who themselves do not read or write in their native language (if other than English), or who do so on a limited basis, or who do not read or write in
English? As for parent-teacher communication, must it generally be teacher-initiated as suggested by Epstein (2001)? Further, what constitutes “clear information” and how should this information be delivered (notes sent home, phone calls, informal chats, or formal parent-teacher conferences, etc.)? Will preferred communication strategies work equally well with all families? Can “blueprints for success” work equally well for most teachers, parents, and children in most communities? These are examples of questions that the prescriptive literature, routinely fails to consider; yet despite their apparent foundational nature, they proved to be crucial questions for the parents and families in this study.

Still, I do not wish to suggest that the prescriptive literature has literally nothing to offer, and that we should throw out the baby with the bathwater. Essentially well meaning in that its apparent goal is to help level an imbalanced playing field (Valdés, 1996), the prescriptive literature appears to have contributed some positive outcomes and helpful ideas. Some prescriptive parent involvement programs may have contributed to children’s academic progress, although this is clearly still under debate,9 and no studies, to my knowledge, have compared the outcomes of prescriptive parental programs to those involving more inclusive, humanizing (Freire 1993 [1970]) efforts to bring parents and schools together, such as the program followed in the present study. Still, to provide another example of a positive contribution, Epstein’s work, though apparently overlooking its own stereotypes, helpfully notes that teachers surveyed who cite infrequent interaction with parents are more likely to stereotype and view parents negatively (Epstein, 2001; Becker & Epstein, 1982). And Comer’s work (cf. Comer, Haynes & Joyner, 1996), although failing to problematize issues of resources and power as related to race, class, and gender (Fine, 1997; Vincent, 1996; Vincent & Martin, 2005), insists upon a “no-fault approach” to home-school collaboration, seeking to move beyond the “blame game” in identifying problems, building consensus, and creating solutions for schools. Still, such attractive language, in its failure to acknowledge the surrounding issues, may amount to mere lip service (Vincent, 1996). Prescriptive studies, then, warrant critical analysis among the broader spectrum of literature on parent involvement.

3.2.2 The Quantitative Strand

Similar discernment appears warranted in examining the second, quantitative strand of the parent involvement literature. This strand (e.g., Jeynes, 2005; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Yan & Lin, 2005; and many others), with some notable exceptions (e.g., Domina, 2005; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996), has tended to espouse the assumptions of the prescriptive literature in seeking to isolate certain variables in order to predict which parent behaviors or cultural traits, again, frequently the European-American middle-class behaviors encouraged in the prescriptive literature, yield the most effective results in children’s academic achievement.

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9Jeynes’ (2005) meta-analysis of quantitative studies on parent involvement programs, for example, found that parent involvement programs in schools are correlated with higher academic achievement for urban students. Mattingly et al. (2002), however, concluded that there is no evidence that parent programs help improve student achievement.
The influential study of Rumberger et al. (1990) is a case in point. Like Dauber and Epstein (2001 [1995]), Rumberger and colleagues find that “parents in high SES families are more likely than parents in low SES families to be involved in their children’s education” (1990:284), although what counts as “involved” is not precisely defined here. Still, to validate this assumption, the researchers examined a small, matched sampling of low-performing students from one California high school, comparing a group of students who dropped out to another group that did not. Rumberger and colleagues, in fact, provide a contradictory conclusion, stating that the parents of those students who dropped out were simultaneously too permissive and indifferent, yet too angry and authoritarian, and thus contributed to the likelihood of their children dropping out. Notably, the study fails to acknowledge the incongruity of such a conclusion. Further, because previous studies relate low school performance to low socioeconomic status, the Rumberger team concludes that these purportedly permissive yet angry parents are also likely to be of low socioeconomic status, even though the team itself compiled no such statistic about the parents in their study. Also missing from this study is an investigation into whether multiple children from within families tended to drop out, or if the students who did so were the only dropouts within their families. The study appears to assume, then, that a high achiever could not be present among the dropout’s siblings. At the same time, while the study does point to the importance of “social support, academic encouragement, and academic assistance” (1990: 297) to counter the dropout trend, it gives no overt indication as to what entities (schools perhaps?) should be expected to spearhead such efforts. The implication, however, is that parents have a greater effect on children’s formal education than schools themselves, and that if children fail in school, their parents are primarily at fault and likely to be of low socioeconomic status.

The similarly influential study of Snow and colleagues, *Unfulfilled expectations: Home and school influences on literacy*, seems likewise fixated on perceived deficits among low-income families, despite the study’s stated intention to “eschew [class] comparisons” and avoid “presupposing the as yet unproven hypothesis that the factors contributing to success for low-income children are exactly the same as those that determine success among children of richer families” (1991:4). The study asserts, for instance, in discussing a model of parent involvement known as the “resilient family” model, that low-income families “differ as a group from middle-class families in the degree of stress to which they are subject” (1991:87) thereby delving into a common, stereotypical class comparison from the outset. Even if these authors had provided evidence to support this claim, they failed to acknowledge that the supposed increased exposure to stressors such as unemployment, disease, and divorce, does not necessarily result in greater failure to appropriately deal with these life challenges or to support children’s schooling.

In point of fact, although the study was expressly designed to compare more successful low-income primary school students to their lower-performing counterparts and examine family influences, in actuality, it bases comparisons among its multiracial, multiethnic, low-income participants on models used to characterize parental influence in European-American middle-class families. In effect, then, as in the prescriptive literature reviewed above, Snow et al. (1991) sustain the involvement practices of the affluent as the standard against which low-income parents are measured. Snow and her colleagues, for instance, measure parental literacy practices based on the “family as educator” model, principally examining the two composite variables of “parental literacy” and “provision
of literacy” (1991:61). Such a model fails to explain, however, how children who are underserved in school, even when their parents are not print literate and do not speak English, can graduate from high school and go on to college (Chapter 6).

In considering the “family as educator” model, in fact, Snow and her colleagues characterize one factor of this model, “creating opportunities to learn” (1991:62) in the most middle-class of terms. Parents, they say, can

...enrich children’s lives and promote their literacy and language indirectly, by facilitating access to other people and activities (as in the case of the stereotypical middle-class child who attends music, ballet, swimming, and French lessons). Even parents whose full-time work and other obligations prohibit them from spending a lot of time with their children may ensure that their children spend time with other adults (friends of the family, extended family members, or tutors) who can function as role models and provide information, interesting conversation, knowledge about the world, aid with homework, and emotional support. (Snow et al., 1991:62, emphasis mine)

Curiously, in this study of low-income families, middle class activities, e.g., French lessons, swimming, and ballet, are called to the fore. Ironically, Barnes and her colleagues do not speak of children enriched by speaking a language other than English in the home. Nor do they mention such enrichment activities associated with other cultural traditions, such as folkloric dance, mariachi bands, or soccer.

In sum, regardless of their best intentions to characterize parental factors contributing to the academic success of low-income children, these researchers repeatedly looked for the display of commonly accepted middle class behaviors among the low-income parents in their study. Despite this incongruity, Snow and her colleagues conclude with surprise, reporting on the children’s educational progress five years later, to see that many of the children, now adolescents, have become the victims of unfulfilled educational expectations. As adolescents, say these researchers, the children came to reduce their academic hopes, which were now in alignment with the children’s test scores produced in the study; no longer did the children’s hopes align with the higher, more optimistic scholastic and career expectations that their mothers had initially expressed. This, say the researchers, “reflects the greater realism of the adolescents themselves” (1991:212). That is one interpretation, but the children’s changing attitudes could also reflect a system of “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 1999), organized to erase children’s linguistic, psychosocial, and cultural resources, their raíces y alas or “roots and wings” (Garcia 2001), in a project of cultural assimilation (Delpit, 1995).

Another increasingly cited quantitative researcher, William Jeynes, similar to Rumberger et al. (1990) and Snow et al. (1991), bases the import of his study upon a stereotype. In his aforementioned meta-analysis of the effects of parent participation among urban schoolchildren, Jeynes characterizes families from urban backgrounds as subject to “high family dissolution rates, numerous two-parent working families, and unique sociological pressures on children” (2005:237). Although not referring to the socioeconomic class of these urban parents, this stereotyping implies that urban parents are less supportive of their children.

Further, while Jeynes (2005) produces some helpful conclusions, this study does so, as we have seen in much of the literature, without clear definitions. In fact, although Jey-
nes at least minimally defines parent involvement programs as “school-sponsored initiatives that are designed to require or encourage parental participation in their children’s education” (2005:239), this description is based upon a cornerstone of the ever-undefined “parental participation.” Further, Jeynes (2005) examines only those aspects of parent involvement “identified by educators as most frequently practiced by parents” (2005:245). He does this without identifying these “educators” or their assumptions relating to race, class, gender, etc., and without any input from parents themselves. At minimum, however, Jeynes (2005) somewhat more concretely identifies parent-child communication, homework-checking, parental “high” (again undefined) expectations, reading with children, attendance at school functions, and “supportive” parenting as the specific involvement practices analyzed in his meta-analysis.

Despite its flaws, Jeynes (2005) arrives at some potentially helpful and hopeful conclusions. Importantly for my study, Jeynes (2005) finds that a “definite pattern that emerged is that some of the most potent facets of parental involvement are some of the more subtle aspects of family support” (2005:262). This conclusion is useful in that it may help explain why many educators and researchers seem to overlook parents’ earnest efforts to be involved. Specifically, the study determines:

Most notably, it was not particular actions such as attending school functions, establishing household rules, and checking student homework that yielded the statistically significant effect sizes. Rather, variables that reflected a general atmosphere of involvement produced the strongest results. Parental expectations and style may create an educationally oriented ambiance, which establishes an understanding of a certain level of support and standards in the child’s mind. (2005:262)

Parental expectations along with parenting style, then, emerge as the most significant variables for parental support of student achievement in the Jeynes (2005) study. Further, these findings transcend racial, economic, and gender lines among urban schoolchildren. Unlike Snow et al. (1991), Jeynes (2005) finds parental expectations to be significant; however, similar to Rumberger et al. (1990), Jeynes (2005) also finds that parenting style is indeed significant. Still, in contrast to the Rumberger study, parenting style is not bifurcated in the Jeynes analysis; rather a productive parenting style is characterized as “loving and supportive” with “an adequate level of discipline” along with such qualities as “trust and being approachable” (2005:246).

That less visible (i.e., less visible to schools) forms of parent involvement, such as giving children encouragement, are those that produce the best results, and that this holds across racial, economic, and gender lines among urbanites, is a valuable finding, as it may help explain why parental efforts frequently go undetected at school and in the literature, especially among parents of marginalized backgrounds. Indeed, this finding may signal why the stereotyping of parents in general, and societally subordinated parents more specifically, is so prevalent; without overt information to counter deeply embedded cultural assumptions, racial stereotypes, and the like, many assessments unquestioningly rely on deficit-ridden myths that only very careful, unbiased or open-ended research can counter.

In fact, the stereotype with which Jeynes (2005) begins, that of urbanites as single-parent or two-parent working families, as well as the underlying stereotype that this implies, i.e., that single and/or working parents are less supportive, is yet another unhelpful,
unstated myth. Still, although Jeynes (2005) bases its import upon this assumption of deficit among urban families, the study’s conclusion contrastingly moves toward transcending certain stereotypes. In short, even amongst studies that may rely on or reinforce some form of stereotyping, promising deductions may be culled. Again, however, heightened discernment may be required.

I underscore the need for such critical analysis, moreover, because a general trend of reductionism based on racial, social, gender, and other prejudices appears to be a common feature in the literature. One study, for instance, reduces another, Klimes-Dougan, Lopez, Nelson & Adelman (1992), to finding that “Hispanic parents were less involved in their children’s education” (Yan & Lin, 2005:119), when actually the findings of Klimes-Dougan and her colleagues are significantly more complex. They found, for instance, that Latin@ parents whose children had adjusted well to kindergarten and first grade showed greater knowledge of school involvement activities than parents whose children had adapted less well. At the same time, their study found that, even though participation among Spanish-speaking parents was greater than that of English-speaking parents (Latin@ and otherwise), Spanish-speaking parents faced greater barriers to involvement, which tended to be overcome when parent involvement activities were designed particularly with this group in mind (Klimes-Dougan, Lopez, Nelson & Adelman, 1992). At the same time, both studies—Yan and Lin (2005) and Klimes-Dougan et al. (1992) and others (e.g., Turney and Kao, 2009)—reduce the work of Lareau (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) to finding that low-income families can become discouraged by cultural differences with schools and are therefore less involved, when in fact the work of Lareau (see below) has illuminated differing practices in parental involvement among different racial and socioeconomic groups, without assuming normative levels or types of involvement.

Interestingly, some quantitative studies that do not submit to reductionism or stereotyping have sought to view parent involvement itself less stereotypically. In the words of quantitative researcher Thurston Domina, parental involvement has been reduced to a mere “catchphrase in educational policy” and a “panacea” in the public discourse (2005:245). Domina’s study, based on national longitudinal data, examined not only elementary schoolchildren’s academic achievement but also their behavioral improvement as related to parent involvement practices. In contrast to the predictions of many prescriptivists and quantitative analysts, the study found:

Attendance at parent-teacher conferences, PTA membership, volunteering at school, homework checking, and homework help are, indeed, associated with high scores on achievement tests and a low incidence of behavioral problems for elementary school children. However, after school and family background and [a] child’s prior academic achievement are controlled, the effect of each of these involvement activities on children’s academic achievement is negative or nonsignificant. (2005:245, emphasis in the original)

Thus, although parent involvement is insignificant in terms of cognitive gains, Domina finds that “parents prevent children’s behavioral problems when they volunteer at school, help their children with their homework, and check their children’s homework” (2005:245, emphasis in the original).
Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996), in a similar vein, critique the assumption of parental involvement as “a unidimensional construct” (1996:126), seeking to view the term more broadly. In this study of a large nationally representative sample of eighth-graders, the researchers examined not only parental activities at school but also “home involvement,” such as discussing school activities and monitoring out-of-school activities. These researchers found no evidence to support the assumption that low-income parents are less involved in their children’s schooling than parents of higher socioeconomic status.

In sum, generally speaking, the quantitative strand of the parent involvement literature, like the prescriptive strand, could benefit from a new ethos, a framework or paradigm (Hidalgo, 1998) to acknowledge its stereotypical discourses and its biases and examine parent involvement from multiple perspectives beyond those of racial privilege, economic affluence, and other manifestations of social and cultural power.

3.2.3 The Interpretive Strand

Finally, an interpretive strand, consisting of ethnographic and other qualitative studies frequently based on participant-observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Erickson, 1986), has sought to bring to light parents’ actual practices and perspectives. Much of this literature (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; Fine, 1993; Graue, et al., 2001; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; López, 2001; Reay, 1998; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996) has provided critical perspectives and challenged the first two strands, pointing out unacknowledged, underlying assumptions and normative constructions (Graue et al., 2001; Reay, 1998) of the ideal parent, which limit definitions of parent involvement and confound the conclusions of prescriptive approaches and of many quantitative studies (Lareau, 2001). As noted, such assumptions center around unacknowledged power differentials that relate primarily to race, class, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, language and literacy use, and other cultural practices. Rather than assuming definitions, engaging in deficit thinking and stereotyping, the practice that Moreno & Valencia (2002) identify as “mythmaking,” qualitative studies have tended to look to parents to understand how they participate in their children’s schooling. In addition, critical studies among these interpretive works have considered the role of social, cultural, and/or historical factors in structuring parental actions. This study thus situates itself within this strand.

Brantlinger (2003) and Graue et al. (2001) have discussed the ways in which European-American middle-class parents enact advocacy for their children by seeking out resources to advantage their children. Based on extensive interview data, Brantlinger contends that “certain flawed moralities and self-centered acts sway society away from an ethics of reciprocity and the best expressions of democratic community life.” She describes a market economy mentality in which “deficit thinking about losers and merit thinking about winners shape American schools” (2003:xii, emphasis in the original). In a similar vein, Graue and her colleagues, found that parents sought to ensure that other children did not have greater advantages than their own. In addition, the Graue study describes how parents at a Midwestern, middle-class, mostly white elementary school learned to mediate their actions with their children’s teacher in an effort to appear “involved” without appearing overbearing, lest they be typecast as hovering “helicopter” parents and appear to cross the line of power that teachers hold. Parents worked to cultivate a persona of “concerned helpmate so that they could have access to important insti-
tutional information” (2001:489). By appearing to be unthreatening and helpful versus critical or “pushy,” parents increased their power and thus their access to information regarding educational resources for their children.

The work of Annette Lareau (1987, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001) has focused on the role of socioeconomic class in home-school relations and also looked at the role of race and class (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In her studies of European-American communities, Lareau has found that lower-income parents’ deference to teachers’ expertise was not viewed as helpful or cooperative by school officials. Nor were lower-income parents prized for their emphasis on teaching their children “good manners and proper behavior” (2000:50). Working-class parents, in fact, saw the school and home as separate entities and sought, in small ways, to maintain this separation. For example, in a read-at-home program sponsored at a working-class school, one mother gave her child credit for reading at home only on school nights and not on weekends, which she viewed as his free time. She thus sought, says Lareau (2000), to maintain the home and school as separate spheres. The working-class parents at this school, then, might not have satisfied prescriptivists’ call to view the home, school, and community as overlapping spheres (cf. Epstein, 2001).

In addition, as in Graue et al. (2001), Lareau and Horvat (1999), through in-depth interviews of parents, students, and school personnel in a racially diverse Midwestern school district, found that teachers tended to deem parents “supportive” when parents expressed empathy for teachers’ hard work and did not seek to complain or critique teachers. Moreover, “supportive” parents were those who accepted “the teacher’s definitions of their children’s educational and social performance” Lareau and Horvat (1999:43). Thus, when an African-American couple complained that their children’s school could be fueling a “‘wave of prejudice’” (1999:43) in their community by emphasizing holidays like Halloween and Presidents’ Day but ignoring Martin Luther King Day, these parents were not seen as advocates or participants, but rather as agitators undermining the authority of the school. Similarly, others (e.g., Graue et al., 2001; Sleeter, 1996) have cited cases where an African-American mother’s efforts to seek resources for her child in school were viewed not as supportive but typecast as meddlesome.

In sum, interpretive views of parent involvement and programming have claimed that prescriptive models do not attempt to recognize parents’ own cultural assumptions and work within those (Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1996, 2000; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996; Hidalgo, 1999; de Carvalho, 2001). De Carvalho (2001), in fact, argues, “families have lost their once central position in the production and reproduction of life conditions and have become subordinated, in varying degrees, to institutions of work and school” (2001:47). The unintended result may be that the family has been weakened by some of the very institutions that wish to strengthen it, including schools and governmental institutions, which largely have preferred to dictate practices rather than to dialogue about them (Fine, 1993; Vincent, 1996).

I now look at another key body of literature for this study, that regarding literacy theory. Because the focal mothers in this study were involved in their children’s education in part through their own participation in Spanish native language literacy classes for adults, I now review literacy research, including work regarding adult and family literacy.
3.3 Literacy Theory

If deficit thinking has beset much of the literature on parent involvement, so, too, did it shroud early notions of literacy. Especially in the decades leading up to the Twenty-first Century, both fields suffered from similar tendencies to view certain populations as lacking, and likewise to christen their respective fields as the magic bullet to plug the supposed chasm. That is, just as much parent involvement literature has prescribed parental involvement as a cure for school failure, print literacy was once seen as a cure-all for the world’s ills. Goody and Watt (1968), for instance, claimed that print literacy had advanced the course of human history, given birth to modern ideals such as democracy and equality, and engendered economic progress throughout the Western world. Further, they contrastingly declared that “non-literate” (including “proto-literate” and “oligo-literate”) societies from Egypt to China had failed to produce the intellectual and economic prosperity of the West. Such claims inspired massive, though arguably unsuccessful, UNESCO literacy campaigns expected to extend the presumed economic and political progress of the West to the rest of the world. To literacy studies, then, Goody and Watt imported from anthropology the notion of a “Great Divide” between “civilized” and “uncivilized,” “superior” and “inferior” cultures (Street, 1985). Ong (1982) later expanded upon their notion that various types of sophisticated, abstract, decontextualized, and rational thinking were possible only in “literate” societies. Similarly, colleague David Olson (1977) argued that there existed an essential truth that could be captured and congealed only in the written word (Street, 1985). In addition to theorizing a platonic, objective truth, then, Olson essentially negated the function of various cultural mechanisms used in transmitting culture to posterity, such as oral literature (Finnegan, 1988) and the use of art or imagery as a pedagogical tool.

Literacy theorist Brian Street dubbed the great divide mentality an “autonomous model,” one that conceptualized literacy as an entity unto itself, detachable from the sociocultural context from which it arises. Challenging this model head on, Street argued:

The claims that texts embody ‘autonomous’ meaning which does not change over time and space is not proven….The actual examples of literacy in different societies that are available to us suggest that it is more often ‘restrictive’ and hegemonic, and concerned with instilling discipline and exercising social control. (1985:4)

Street, then, along with others (cf. Cook-Gumperz, 1986), identified the use of print literacy, conceived of as an autonomous entity and administered principally through formal schooling, as a tool of social control. In opposition to the autonomous model, he proposed an “ideological model” and called upon scholars to acknowledge the dominant social and cultural forces that shape the ideologies and practices encompassing literacy use:

I use the term ‘ideological’ to describe this approach, rather than less contentious or loaded terms such as ‘cultural’, ‘sociological’ or ‘pragmatic’…because it signals quite explicitly that literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures. The very emphasis on the ‘neutrality’ and ‘autonomy’ of literacy by writers such as Goody, Olson and
Ong is itself ‘ideological’ in the sense of disguising this power dimension. (1993:7)

Overlooking societal power structures is thus another commonality shared by mainstream parent involvement literature and the autonomous model of literacy known as the Great Divide.

In opposition to this line of thought, Street (1985, 1993) and others (e.g., Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981) called for the recognition of multiple literacies in varied societies and looked to ethnography as an ideal form of research to explore the varied nature of literate practices around the world. Many looked to Hymes’ (1974) call for an “ethnography of communication” that would examine language use within and across communities (Schultz & Hull, 2002). Similarly inspiring was the ethnographic work of Shirley Brice Heath (1982, 1983), which detailed unique and varied literate practices among different racial and socioeconomic groups in the Piedmont Carolinas, and of Scribner and Cole (1981), whose work among the Vai in Liberia determined that the Great Divide’s claims regarding the supposed cognitive benefits associated with print literacy were grossly inflated (Schultz & Hull, 2002).

3.3.1 Adult Literacy and Reading the World

Whereas Street called upon literacy research and researchers to acknowledge the social and cultural contexts that shape literacy practices, the eminent Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1993 [1970]), 1994; Freire & Macedo, 1987), working primarily with adults, proposed that literacy instruction should involve students in such an exploration. Literacy for Freire entailed a “humanizing” pedagogy revolving around students’ intellectual curiosity (1998) and ontological need for self-actualization (1993 [1970]). He advanced a pedagogy that sought the creative cultivation of knowledge and inspired students to investigate their location and participation in social, cultural, and political worlds. Indeed, Freire’s pedagogy responded to his own world in this respect. First, in a general sense, it answered to what Freire viewed as the traditional, and still prevalent, “banking” system of education that hegemonically deposits canonical information into students’ supposedly empty minds (1993 [1970]). Second, and equally close to home for Freire, he was reacting to the history of limited access to education that he had witnessed among the poor in his own country, in a system of educational haves and have-nots that created power-brokers and peasants (Souto-Manning, 2007). In rejoinder to this system, Freire called for “dialogical and problem-posing education” (1993:40),

…where “men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation.” (Macedo, 2000a:12, quoting Freire, 1993)

Freire termed conscientização (“conscientization”) the process of “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (translator’s fn., Freire,1993:35). This student-driven, intellectual interrogation was to place “subjectivity and objectivity in constant dialectal relationship” (1993:50) in a process of critical reflection upon the world and one’s engagement in it.
In dialectal thought, world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection. (1993:53)

For Freire, then, literacy was not simply an act of decoding the word but also the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Learning to read words without an understanding of their role in the world and its systems of power and inequity—including the reader’s position in and relation to that world and its words—amounted to a mere “banking” system of education. Freire’s pedagogy thus requires a relational dialectic, which he termed “praxis” (1993 [1970]), in which practice and reflection/research are not separated or dichotomized, as in many educational institutions today, but rather contained in a single pedagogical practice. Interestingly, as noted in the theoretical framework, a corresponding dialectic is evident in the view of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Bakhtin saw subjects as constantly engaged in a dialogic process between “authoritative [e.g., societal and cultural] discourses” and “internally persuasive discourses,” in a process of “ideological becoming” not unlike Freire’s process of conscientização. The principal difference appears to be that Bakhtin focused on the interaction of competing societal and personal discourses within the individual mind, while Freire’s pedagogy cultivates the airing of such discourses within community circles. Thus, although approaching the phenomenon of human development from different foci, taken together, these two perspectives can help enhance a framework for understanding of the interplay of literacy development within individuals and communities.

In fact, development of this sort, that is, shifting ideologies vis-à-vis print, results from the nature of print as a tool embedded in sociocultural practice (Vygotsky, 1978). On an individual level, one’s beliefs evolve along with practical and ideological relations concerning print within one’s sociocultural milieu. As Ferdman (1990, 1991) explains, the use of print entails literate identities shaped by one’s culture, which mediates one’s engagement in the practices that surround print. Similarly, Kalman (2004a, 2004b) describes the orientation and reorientation that may be required for adult learners who find themselves labeled as “illiterate” in their respective societies. In the case of adults with limited access to formal schooling or to print, she argues, literacy learning is not merely a set of cognitive skills for reading the word, but also an evolitional process of social re-construction and repositioning of the self, of struggling with authoritative discourses and increasingly giving voice to internally persuasive discourses, of shifting ideologies and beliefs about who reads, when, where, and for what purposes (Kalman, 2004b; Miano, 2004, quoting Kalman). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) process of “legitimate peripheral participation,” of gaining access to a “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998, 2006) like the Freirean-oriented adult native language literacy classes that served as the site for this study, can become a “generative space” (Kalman, 2004a, following Zboray, 1993) and “safe haven for learning” (Gowen & Bartlett, 1997:143), for developing new identities and cultivating practices otherwise often constructed as illegitimate for societal members stigmatized as “illiterate.”

Freire’s work, in short, provides a pedagogical framework designed to inspire critical reflection of one’s socioeconomic, political, cultural, and historical place in the
Although principally known in the United States and elsewhere as a politicized “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1993 [1970], cf. Gowen and Bartlett, 1997), it is likewise a gradually transformational pedagogy of hope, love, and freedom (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1993 [1970], 1994, 1998; Trueba, 1999). Although Freire’s work tends to be examined in a communal sense, his work also addresses elements of individual development, like Bakhtin’s ideological becoming. Collins, for instance, elegantly describes Freire’s view of the gradually transformational nature of the human condition, in which humans

…experience reality as a process. As reflective and finalizing beings the reality they discover is seen to be historical, and they themselves are revealed as historical beings with a past, present, and future….Their praxis is a permanent task of becoming. (1977:49)

For Freire, then, the “unfinishedness” (1998) of the human condition “expresses itself in these dialectical opposites: to be and to be-becoming” (Collins, 1977:49, quoting Freire, 1970:105). To be and to be-becoming, as Collins explains, “the English equivalents of Freire’s words ser and estar siendo” (1977:49), express the human contradiction of at once being and becoming in the same reality of time and space. Thus, although Freire’s thinking is sometimes seen as relating mainly to broad, communal, or revolutionary transformations, such as political movements and labor struggles, it similarly applies to human development in personal and localized spaces and moments. Holland and her colleagues, for instance, speak of subjects who enact “at least a modicum of agency” (1998:40) as they engage in social and cultural worlds. Correspondingly, Freire’s pedagogy, in ministering to learners’ humanity, encourages seemingly humble endeavors. Thus, an examination of ostensibly humble efforts to enact a modicum of agency is crucial if we are to recognize parents’ labors and struggles. That is, in order to make visible to others—whether to educators, researchers, or the dominant society—the efforts of immigrant parents in their processes of being and becoming in a new world—in their attempts to seek legitimate peripheral participation within new institutions and communities of practice—a detailed, ethnographic portrait that includes their seemingly minimal efforts is essential. This is so, in part, because when viewing society’s margins as central, ostensibly humble acts may appear herculean indeed.

In fact, although adult literacy studies since Freire’s earlier work have examined adults’ varied roles—as workers (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Hull, 1993; Katz, 1999; Tannock, 1997), as students in adult literacy classes (Gowen and Bartlett, 1997; Kalmar, 2001; Norton Peirce, 1995; Rockhill, 1993), and as members of social networks (Farr, 1994; Fingeret, 1983; Guerra, 1998; Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994)—what these works tend to share is a view of adults reading the world—at times with the aid of the word—often while positioning and repositioning (Kalman 2004a, 2004b) themselves within that world. Fingeret, for instance, documents the social networks, often family-based, of non-print literate adults, finding that although such adults “cannot decode

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10 See Chapter 4 for a description of Freirean pedagogy as it was exercised at the site of this study.
11 Writing in 1983, Fingeret uses the term “illiterate,” a term that I eschew in favor of the less stigmatized “non-print literate.” Further, as explained by Kalman, “Who we label literate or illiterate is as much a func-
print, they constantly are decoding the social world” (1983:137), creating and utilizing social networks in which skills of various kinds, from decoding print to making home repairs to listening to others’ problems, are reciprocally valued and exchanged.

Negotiating the social world, however, is not generally a seamless, uncontested process:

When illiterate adults decode their social world,…they must confront the competing messages of power and impotence. The literate society transmits clear judgments about illiterate adults’ inability to cope or survive, and this often conflicts with illiterate adults’ experience of their own intentional action in the world. Interdependence requires illiterate adults to recognize their potency in the social world. (Fingeret, 1983:142)

In Bakhtinian terms, non-print literate adults may confront a world of authoritative discourses and may need to counter those with internally persuasive discourses that acknowledge these adults’ contributions. Indeed, in studies of adult literacy, documentation of similar social-discursal divisions and/or confrontations abounds. Various peripheries or borders of sorts are frequently challenged or crossed, but rarely without contestation. In the workplace, for instance, Hull (1993) points out the social divisions between those respected for certain valued activities and those stigmatized for not performing these privileged activities. Similarly, Klassen and Burnaby (1993) describe how Latin American immigrants in a Canadian English as a second language (ESL) class delineated “those who know” and those who “don’t know” within their classroom: the former were students whose print literacy in Spanish enabled them to engage with print in their ESL class, while the latter were those unacquainted with print literacy, who therefore could not study written materials independently. Even in such contested environments, however, studies have noted instances of adults exercising at least a modicum of agency. Thus, while crossing borders between worlds of varying literate and social practices may engender contestations, expressions of agency have tended to manifest as well, often as hybrid forms of expression and engagement, such as reimagined alphabets (Kalmar, 2001), new forms of interaction surrounding innovative forms of electronic communication (Gee, 2004; Mahiri, 2004) and social networking surrounding multiple skills and literacies (Fingeret, 1983).

3.2.2 Family Literacy: Multimodal and Multidirectional

Because there is much overlap in studies of adult literacy and of parent involvement with studies in family literacy, I limit my discussion here to a few critical points. Generally speaking, while many adult literacy studies have looked at ways in which adults seek their footing amongst new literacies or literate environments, family literacy studies have tended to examine the ways in which literacy is exchanged within the family, usually with some attention to parental roles. Although family literacy research has also examined adult programs designed to train parents as schoolteachers in the home, or it has looked at interventionist programs designed to break an apparent intergenerational “cycle
of illiteracy” (Gadsden, 1994; Handel, 1999), these perspectives are not useful for the study at hand. As will be made plain in the coming chapters, the adult literacy program in which this study’s subjects participated sought to base its curriculum on many of the expressed needs and desires of its participants, all adults and mainly parents. Participants’ articulated needs or goals that sometimes had to do with family concerns, children’s schooling, or print literacy, and sometimes not. One goal, for instance, to learn oral English for the workplace, did not directly relate either to children or print. In fact, culling parental input or wisdom as a basis for program development is a somewhat recent innovation (Gadsden, 1994). As Gadsden (1994) advises, programs can be constructed as support mechanisms for families without assuming a deficit perspective but instead recognizing and building upon families’ strengths and contributions. Such views undergirded the parent program under study. In a similar vein, the program under study did not view limited access to print literacy as some form of crippling intergenerational disease. Rather, as we shall see, print was introduced to parents through teachers and facilitators, and it was studied—both in terms of thematic and mechanical codification—in order to cultivate print literate practices and relationships in the adult classroom, many of which could also be developed in the home or could reinforce practices already taking place there.

Such practices and relations, of course, differ among and within varying cultures, social classes, schools, classrooms, and families. Heath (1982), to give one example, revealed and challenged the European-American middle-class assumption that parents must read stories to their children nightly. Auerbach (1989), in turn, further challenged the notion, stating that family literacy instruction needn’t be unidirectional from parents to children. Rather, literacy brokering in the home can be both multidirectional and multimodal, as children, for instance, may act as literacy instructors or brokers for their parents in a variety of ways. Children may read to their parents (Auerbach, 1989), act as interpreters for their parents (Vásquez et al., 1994; Valdés, 2003), or assist their parents in household matters such as banking or health care (Rosa Franco LeClerc, 2001, personal communication; Valdés, 2003) and filling out forms (Vásquez, et al., 1994). In fact, in much the same way that Fingeret posits social networks surrounding literate practices, Auerbach sums up studies in family literacy by saying,

What emerges…is not at all a picture of deficit or literacy impoverishment, but instead a picture of mutual support—of family members working together to help each other in a variety of ways. Clearly a model that rests on the assumption of unilateral parent-to-child literacy assistance, with a neutral transfer of skills, misses an important aspect of this dynamic…(1989:172)

As such, I use the term family literacy network to describe the literacy exchanges that take place within families. Indeed, according to Fingeret (1983), much literacy-related social networking is centered around the family. Still, differently from Auerbach and following Valdés (personal communication), my view of the family literacy network does not assume that children’s provision of literacy services to parents (or other elders) necessarily engenders a “parent-child role reversal” (1989:172) that could threaten a par-
ent’s authority. On the contrary, parental authority may often be invoked in enacting and maintaining literate practices and exchanges in the household.

4. Conclusion

This study seeks to acknowledge the intersectional invisibility (Crenshaw, 1995) likely to affect its seven focal participants, Mexican immigrant mothers residing in the Silicon Valley, California. These women, subordinated within the larger society for their gender, ethnicity, poverty, immigrant and documentation status, as well as their relatively limited access to formal education, are thus rendered, along with their parent involvement, virtually invisible. Any effort to make visible the features of their literate practices and parent participation—their development and activation of social and cultural capital—will thus profit from an emic perspective, an ethnographic portrait that seeks to acknowledge but move beyond societal myths, and gain an understanding through the eyes and efforts of the mamás themselves.

Similarly, Valdés qualifies child interpreters as subject to the authority of the parent for whom they interpret; the parent acts as “director” and “can bring the young interpreter into line at any time” (2003:96).
Chapter 3: Research Methodology: Ethnography and the Thematic Narrative

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speakers’ intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (1981)

1. Why Ethnography? Study Aims and Methodological Assumptions

1.1 Bakhtin, Bourdieu, and the Import of Narrative Discourse in Ethnographic Work

The methodology design for this study emerged from the premise, laid out by early 20th century Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, that our individual cultural and historical trajectories, along with our current social milieu, shape our ways of understanding, acting, and reacting in the world (Bakhtin, 1981). Note the similarity of Bakhtin’s vision with Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of *habitus* and field, that is, of embodied versus objectified history. While Bakhtin devotes much attention to the dialogic influences of our past relations and experiences upon our present understandings and actions (often performed through anticipated reactions in the future), for Bourdieu, this past is embodied in the *habitus* and enacted in a cultural field of play, populated by actors endowed with various forms of capital. For Bakhtin, in contrast, the lived past and anticipated future are made flesh through language. As such, I sought to bring together a set of methodological practices that would cultivate an understanding of these various theoretical phenomena, of the past as embodied and objectified but also as verbalized.

This study, then, was based on a framework of diachronic and synchronic girders, or more precisely, of two intersecting dimensions, one representing our embodied cultural experience (see also Rogoff, 2003) and the other our social relations (see also Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991) or fields of interaction and dialogue. In a similar vein, arguing for a Latin@ family research paradigm that considers race, ethnicity, class, and gender, Hidalgo likewise asserts that we “construct knowledge through our lived experiences” (1998:105). The methodological practices exercised in this study thus needed to attend fully to both to raced, classed, and gendered dimensions as well as temporal dimensions to provide a holistic view of participants’ lives and the contexts in which those lives had evolved and would continue to play out. In order to cultivate such an understanding of peoples’ past histories as connected to their present circumstances and future possibilities, a wide array of qualitative research procedures, and more specifically, ethnographic practice, would be vital. This study thus employed ethnographic methods of observation, participation, and analysis in order to pay attention to interacting social forces and the histories that undergird them, to get a feel for participants’ perceptions as related to both *habitus* and field, and the so-called “rules of the game” within that field. Yet Bourdieu and others (e.g. Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau 1996, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) have examined class differences in the reproduction of social and educational inequity. An adequate analysis of such class differences, however, was beyond the scope of the present study. Rather, with an evolving unit of analysis defined as instances of parent
participation within the focal mothers’ expressed and/or enacted definition of that notion, this study tended to focus on the mothers’ efforts to enact a “modicum of agency” (Holland et al., 1998) as they sought educational opportunities (read, cultural capital), for themselves and their children. By paying attention to this process, I felt, the mothers could teach educators a great deal about extending the boundaries of what has traditionally counted as parent participation.

Returning briefly to Bakhtin, although Bakhtinian theory centers on novelistic discourse, many ethnographic studies (e.g., Dyson, A. H., 1993, 1997; Graue et al., 2001; Holland et al., Hull & Zacher, 2004) apply his theory as a metaphor for human discourse, activity, and identity, and the sociocultural understanding that motivates and undergirds these aspects of human interaction. His view of the “dialogic nature of discourse” (1981:279) suggests why his theory is central to many ethnographers:

“Bakhtin has theorized speaking in terms of what he called ‘dialogism.’ The basic insight behind this term is that when social actors speak, their words are not merely their own but reflect their engagement in a broader ideological and verbal world. Thus, what might appear as straight monologue is ‘dialogized’ by its refraction of the social horizon.” (Hanks, 1996:202)

Specifically, Bakhtin’s understanding of participants’ words and stories—and more fully, their discourse—as both resultant and emblematic, as markers of internal perceptions and as refractions of one’s social and cultural milieu, underscored for this study the significance of the in-depth interview alongside extended participant-observation as essential ethnographic practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

1.2 The Open-ended Interview, an Elicitor of Narratives

The importance of multiple open-ended interviews cannot be overemphasized, whether those of some length conducted in private spaces; those conducted at home, perhaps with family members present; or those brief, focused, spontaneous exchanges, realized for specific purposes in public spaces such as the classroom with others present and within practical routines. The spontaneous exchange emerges naturally within the ethnographic process, while the in-depth interview requires planning, appointment-setting, and other such arrangements. But both forms of exchange proved indispensable for this study. In some instances, for example, a participant repeated a similar story, concern, and/or theme in multiple contexts, signaling the magnitude of the issue for that participant (Linde, 1993). In other instances, the confidential interview provided a mechanism through which to share life stories and landmark events no matter how private or painful, sometimes tellingly distinctive from the unfa!tering public persona of a given participant. It was from these varied interactions, realized over the course of months and years, that multi-textured portraits emerged. Such portraits help depict a landscape not only geographical—certainly a crucial element for a study of people whose lives span the U.S.-Mexico border—but likewise temporal (Linde, 1993 following Schegloff, 1972), more fully depicting participants’ insights about their social milieu, both then and now. These perceptions include “relevant [group] membership characteristics” and “knowledge of the world…assumed for members of that class” or group (Linde 1993:56), both at the time of events and in later reflections at the time the story is recounted. Thorough, open-ended
interviews, then, provide a panorama of the participants’ understandings in their various hues, including understandings of what Bourdieu called “the rules of the game” (Lareau and Horvat, 1999, following Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), i.e., the implicit conventions in any given sociocultural milieu.

1.3 Participant-Observation as a Window on Sociocultural Practice

Further, alongside the power and utility of in-depth interviewing for adding meat to the bones of the aforementioned cultural/historical axis, especially in the case of subjects whose populations are marginalized in society as well as in much of the literature (Donnor, 2006), participant-observation provided a rich field of reference for sociocultural practice in present environments. Described procedurally below, participant-observation is designed to probe sociocultural interaction—including the “meaning-perspectives” of its participants and the “principles of conduct” for their everyday lives, both in and outside the focal setting—and to compare these markers of sociocultural organization with those found in other settings, times, and places (Erickson, 1986:121). As such, ethnographic participant-observation was precisely what was needed to help answer research questions (see section 2.1 below) about how parents participate in their children’s schooling. Specifically directing himself to ethnography in education, Erickson describes the fieldwork performed in the participant-observation process as involving:

(a) intensive, long-term participation in a field setting; (b) careful recording of what happens in the setting by writing field notes and collecting other kinds of documentary evidence (e.g., memos, records, examples of student work, audiotapes, videotapes); and (c) subsequent analytic reflection on the documentary record obtained in the field, and reporting by means of detailed description, using narrative vignettes and direct quotes from interviews, as well as by more general description in the form of analytic charts, summary tables, and descriptive statistics. Interpretive fieldwork research involves being unusually thorough and reflective in noticing and describing everyday events in the field setting, and in attempting to identify the significance of actions in the events from the various points of view of the actors themselves. (1986:121)

With these methodological preliminaries in mind, I set out in search of a research site. The following section explains how I found one.

2. Methodological Decisions

If I appear to cling rigidly to Bakhtin’s view of the dialogic nature of discourse, to a view of the present as refracted through a prism of past experiences and future expectations, then it is in part because I saw this dialogism played out through the course of my own life, leading me to this field of research. From the broad strokes of my personal formation to the sequence of events that led me to Jefferson School, each step, each decision, was plainly hinged on a previous one.

2.1 Initial Steps: Research District-wide and at Jane Lester School

It was, in fact, a series of events, precipitated by the juxtaposition of two in particular, that ultimately led me to Jefferson School and its parents program for my dissertation
project. As a graduate student researcher I had already visited Jefferson and several other schools in its district many times, but an innocent yet declined request from a child set off that first spark.

One morning during a visit to Jane Lester School, a few miles east of Jefferson, a beginning reading group of first- through third-graders was wrapping up its 90-minute language arts session. Cecilia, a bright and forthright six-year-old and adept Spanish-English code-switcher, whined out loud and clear, “I wanna dibujar!” (I want to draw!). Cecilia and her classmates had spent much of the session reading vocabulary words in chorus, and then pages from a story in chorus. Each student also wrote one structured sentence about “helmets” (a word their teacher had selected from the story), also as a whole-class activity. Following all of this choral and structured activity, perhaps Cecilia was aching for some outlet for creativity. But whatever the case, her request was immediately denied: “No hay tiempo” (There isn’t any time), came the rapid response from her teacher, Ms. Valentine. What a shame, I thought, as I observed the class on behalf of my university, part of a team assessing bilingual education programs. From my graduate studies, I knew that drawing is a precursor to early writing (Clay, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978), so it was natural for Cecilia to want to draw during her language arts period. Unfortunately, as Ms. Valentine lamented, the national standardized reading program used at her urban, predominantly Latin@ immigrant school paid scant attention to writing and allowed only for circumscribed, structured activity. Although, as a new teacher, Ms. Valentine said she appreciated the detailed lesson plans prescribed by the reading program, she also regretted the lack of time it allotted to writing. Indeed, other teachers I spoke with at Jane Lester shared this complaint.

That was the first of the two events I mentioned. The other occurred when, a short time later, I observed an evening workshop for parents at Jane Lester and required by the same national reading program. Since more than 50 parents attended each quarterly meeting, they were divided into groups according to their children’s grade levels and sent to workshops in different classrooms. I observed a workshop conducted in Spanish, since that was the native language of the 20 parents in attendance, mostly mothers but a few fathers of kindergarten through second grade (K-2) children. The workshop facilitator, a second-grade teacher at Jane Lester, encouraged parents to read stories to their children and likewise to promote children’s drawing, as a precursor to writing, at home. “Ouch!” I thought. While I was impressed with the teacher’s knowledge of writing pedagogy, I had to ask myself, was it fair for a school to expect parents to teach the so-called three R’s at home, when the school itself was admittedly only able to fully address two of those R’s (reading and math)? And what about the parents themselves? Since they were not asked for any input during the workshop, other than to put their names on an attendance sheet, it was impossible to know what they thought about this. These two events, then, spurred me on to seek answers to these questions.

I embarked on a pilot study in the spring of 2002 and interviewed three mothers from amongst the several parents in attendance that evening. Each of the mothers turned out to be a Mexican immigrant between ages 25-35 with school-aged children. Each of them reported supporting their children’s education in a variety of ways. Some of these were conventionally recognized forms of parent involvement, e.g., volunteering as a teacher’s helper; attending parent workshops; monitoring children’s homework; participating in parent/child reading programs; and, yes, supplying their children with paper,
pencils, and crayons for drawing and writing at home, just as requested in the Jane Lester parent workshop. But the mothers also contributed in ways not typically recognized in the standard literature, such as providing a loving home, demonstrating a solid work ethic, and chatting—networking really—with other mothers each morning as the children lined up outside their classrooms before school. Through such networking, the mothers said, they learned a great deal about programs available that could help their children.

Following the pilot study, I wanted to know more about how Mexican immigrant parents supported their children’s education, both in conventional ways, as recognized by prescriptive parent involvement literature, and in less conventionally recognized but nevertheless substantive ways. Further, I wanted to focus on the mothers: following Reay (1998), it seemed that parental involvement among many Latin@ parents, as in any number of societies, including that of the European-American middle class, typically means mother involvement. I also wondered if certain factors—age, work schedule, children’s ages, health, economic conditions, social class, living conditions, immigration status, level of formal education, level of print literacy, and time since immigrating to the United States, for instance—influenced how mothers participated in their children’s schooling, and I wanted to know how parents understood their own efforts. Toward that end, my research questions took shape as outlined below.

2.2 Research Questions

Patterns of participation
• What constitutes “parent participation” for the mothers, and how indeed do the women and their spouses participate? Do parents participate in conventionally recognized ways? Do they participate in other, less typically recognized ways? Do patterns of participation emerge?
• What are parents’ understandings of their interactions with and activities at their children’s school? Do parents feel they gain or learn from some of these experiences? If so, in what ways?

Home-school relations
• What efforts does the school in this study, Jefferson Elementary, take to reach out to parents, and how do parents respond? Do school officials acknowledge and support parents’ efforts? If so, in what ways?
• What are the school’s expectations of parents, and how do school officials communicate these expectations? What are parents’ understandings of the school’s expectations?

The role of print literacy
• What are parents’ ways with the printed word? What role does print literacy play in parents’ school involvement? Given that schools’ raison d’être is arguably print literacy, and that some parents have had limited access to formal schooling or print literacy or both, do parents view their participation differently, vis-à-vis the school, according to their ways with the printed word?
• How do school officials view parents with limited print literacy, and what are school officials’ expectations of these parents?
2.3 Site Selection: Jefferson School

Although I had admired the teachers and parents I worked with at Jane Lester, I wanted to examine parent participation from within a program unencumbered by the restrictions of a nationally marketed reading program. I sensed that such a “one-size-fits-all” program was more likely to approach the parental role as part of its overall strategy to help raise students’ test scores, and I was looking for a program with broader goals than that. I hoped that a locally based program might tend to view parents more as lifelong learners themselves, as adults with their own needs to be addressed. I wanted a research venue unfettered by an impermeable curriculum, whether applied to students, parents, or both. From my work throughout the District, I knew that Jefferson teachers had resisted the District’s push for its low-income, predominantly Latin@, inner-city schools to adopt this national reading program. The teachers at Jefferson had instead visited various schools in the Central Coast area of California, researched materials, devised their own reading program, and pressed the District to accept their proposal. If Jefferson’s teachers could be successful in designing and promoting their own reading program, I thought the school might also have a similarly unique parents program.

2.4 Site Visitations

Although I had visited Jefferson School on multiple occasions on behalf of another study, my first visit in association with the present study came in May of 2003, when I met Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo. Herself a doctoral student, Ernestina expressed enthusiasm for my research interest. At the same time, she oriented me to the parent program at Jefferson, and invited me to attend its classes and programs for adults.

When classes began in the fall of 2003, I regularly attended two of them: the fundamental Spanish literacy class one night per week, and the parent literature circles (Ada, 1988) and learning strategy workshops one morning per week. With scheduling and programmatic changes, my class visits shifted and increased in the second year of the study. Overall, I attended these classes (or later versions of them) across two academic years (September, 2003 through June, 2005). Additionally, I observed and participated in other Jefferson programs, such as coffees with the principal, newspaper distributions, and special events and potluck dinners a total of 25 times throughout this period. I also visited the Jefferson neighborhood to shop or go to its public library, and to visit two families in the study who welcomed me into their homes. I continued to visit the area in order to conduct interviews with study participants during the 2005-2006 school year. These visits are summarized in Table 3.1.

2.5 Researcher Role

During the first year, my goal was to acquaint myself as much as possible with Jefferson’s various parent classes and programs, and with the parents themselves. At the same time, my role as participant-observer took shape in response to programmatic needs as expressed by Ernestina Olmedo and parents who attended the classes. Thus, although Ernestina agreed from the outset that my purpose was to carry out research and we explained to parents that with their consent I would be writing “un libro” (a book, which was how we described my dissertation) about their experiences in the program, she and

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1See Chapter 4, especially Table 4.2, for a summary of program offerings and descriptors.
members of the class also requested my assistance where needed. The fundamental Spanish literacy classes, for instance, made use of volunteer tutors and teachers to work one-on-one with parents and facilitate small group work. In addition, literature circles typically held small group discussions led by facilitators. Ernestina frequently requested that I assume such roles, and to the parents, in short order, I became known by the title of maestra, as did other teachers who frequently volunteered in the program. In fact, parents rarely, if ever, called us by name alone but rather addressed us using this title of respect, maestra. The following year, as parent programming expanded at Jefferson, more classes were added, and more volunteer maestras and maestros were needed. I became a literature circle facilitator in the fall semester of 2004, as well as an occasional discussion leader in the fundamental Spanish literacy class and occasional teacher in the basic oral English class as well.

Table 3.1. Site visitations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>On-site research activities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September, 2003-June, 2004</td>
<td>Visited parent classes and attended programs; acted as participant-observer and volunteer maestra, tutor, and/or facilitator once per week in each of two parent classes: fundamental Spanish literacy (26 times) and literature circle/learning strategy parent workshops (9 times).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October, 2004-December-2004</td>
<td>Facilitated a literature circle twice per week (20 times total). Acted as participant-observer and tutor in fundamental Spanish literacy class once per week (10 times total).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 2005-June, 2005</td>
<td>Acted as participant-observer, tutor and occasional maestra in the fundamental Spanish literacy class (29 times total) and basic English class (23 times total).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 2005-June, 2006</td>
<td>Conducted 21 audio taped interviews with focal parents, family members, and parent leaders, as well as school staff. Conducted home 14 visits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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With respect to my role as a researcher, my role as maestra or tutora presented some challenges. Generally speaking, I made use only of note taking using a pen and paper during my class visits. With respect to data collection, my roles at times limited my ability to take notes. I did my best to compensate, however, by adapting my research techniques. When working one-on-one with a parent, for instance, I frequently took only cursory notes so as not to interrupt the flow of instruction and interaction. Immediately following class, however, I typically audio-recorded more elaborate “headnotes” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1993). In addition, although I felt recording devices might seem intimidating or intrusive to the parents, on those occasions when Ernestina asked me to facilitate a class discussion or “dinamica social,” as we called it, I audiotaped the discussion for later transcription. For reasons explained below, I rejected the use videotape.
A second challenge presented by my role and indeed my identity as a maestra was my strong identification with Ernestina and with the volunteer teachers, whom I saw as colleagues and members of a profession that I have practiced and loved for twenty years. I thus had to hold at bay my inner tendencies to hone in on matters upon which my study clearly was not designed to focus, such as instructional methodology and materials, classroom authority, and other pedagogical issues. Unless the parents themselves brought up such matters as meaningful for them, I made repeatedly conscious efforts to place my focus with the parents as students in the class, and away from instructional considerations that appealed to my teacherly identity. This is not to suggest that pedagogical considerations lacked import for the study as a whole, but rather that they were not the focus, the parents were. In addition to conscious reminders to myself to focus on the parents, individual interviews as well as home visits helped me to focus on the parents and see them in their own light.

A third challenge, given my role as maestra, was the authority that this gave me. While I did not possess the authority of Ernestina, the coordinator of the program, its lead teacher, and part of the regular Jefferson staff, my “title” as maestra was accompanied by a measure of deference that I found problematic on two counts. First, I did not want to abuse the authority of this title, and so I made it very clear to parents that their participation in the study was entirely optional, and that they could participate in classes without joining the study. Second, I was likewise concerned that an identity as maestra would prevent me from being considered a peer in whom the parents could confide. But at least in matters educational, and sometimes other matters as well, it appeared that several parents felt comfortable in bringing their concerns to me. One mother, Rosa Anaya, for instance, seemed reserved at times in discussing broader familial or personal matters, but she had no qualms about bringing to me concerns regarding family members’ educational needs. For instance, when a below-average test score left Rosa concerned about what she viewed as her third-grader Kathy’s sluggish progress in English, Rosa spoke very openly with me (see Chapter 6 for details). I mention this episode here not to showcase parent’s frustrations, centered around yet another test score, but rather to demonstrate that my role as maestra and the environment in which I worked at Jefferson could allow for such concerns to be shared openly.

In fact, in addition to viewing me as a maestra, parents seemed likewise to see me as someone who valued them and wished to be helpful. They understood that I wanted to write un libro to help tell their stories to educators who might otherwise never learn about parents like them, their values, and their struggles. Indeed, if I identified with the teachers, I likewise empathized with the parents as people who often faced grave challenges with admirable resilience. As a wife whose husband suffered from a terminal illness and the mother of two teenagers, I found strength in their strength, and I took solace in their presence, en la convivencia, as Ernestina would say, the living and sharing together. I was not concerned that the circumstances of my life could lead me to “over-empathize” with the parents but instead considered such empathy a necessary element of effective qualitative research (Emerson, 1983; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

If I was unconcerned about my level of empathy, however, I did harbor a distinct concern about my non-native Spanish. True, for a non-native speaker, I’d made a good deal of headway as a lifelong learner of the language. I had studied Spanish continuously since grammar school and worked as a university Spanish instructor for 20 years. Like-
wise, I was, and am rated at the highest level, superior, on the oral proficiency scale of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and am a certified ACTFL oral and writing proficiency tester. As a graduate student, I studied Spanish linguistics and sociolinguistics, including courses in Spanish dialectology, which treated some of the dialectal variation I encountered in this study. Still, even with a strong background in Spanish, I was fully aware that my language abilities had their limitations. Usually I understood classroom happenings completely: after all, the classroom is my daily professional domain. However, I was also aware that sometimes when parents told their stories in or out of class, I could miss details that at times seemed to be linked to elliptical information that native listeners, if present, understood implicitly, always, even when I did not. Fortunately, in one-on-one interviews, it was easy to clarify ellipses, misunderstandings, or dialectal variances. Elsewhere, given the opportunity, I would likewise frequently request a clarification or restatement in order to gain a better understanding of a given situation. In sum, although I suffered from linguistic limitations, I likewise tended to be in tune with them, and so I made a point of asking for clarification whenever and wherever it seemed helpful. For example, in an interview exchange with Carolina Sandoval, a focal parent in the study, I asked for frequent clarifications, including with regard to the word retirado, which can mean “remote” as well as “retired.” It might have seemed a minor point at the time, but upon further analysis of fieldnote and interview data, it proved to be a point of great import. Carolina was explaining to me that she walked her son to school, even though it was remotely located:

Carolina: el más chiquito [el hijo menor de Carolina], ey, pues porque estudió…estudió hasta segundo [grado en México]. Y pues yo lo llevaba porque sí estaba retirado, yo lo llevaba caminando, iba a recogerlo y pues hacíamos casi media hora de camino, caminando…
Ali: ¿caminando a pie?
Carolina: A pie caminábamos hasta la escuela…
Ali: ¿del rancho a la escuela?
Carolina: um hmm….y pues está retirado…
Ali: Cuando dice está “retirado”, ¿es que toma mucho tiempo para llegar?
Carolina: para llegar caminando
Ali: Sí, sí.

Carolina: my youngest child, um well, because he studied…he studied through the second grade [in Mexico]. And so I took him [to school] because it was remote, I accompanied him walking, I would go to pick him up, and it took us almost half an hour to get there.
Ali: Walking on foot?
Carolina: On foot, we walked to school.
Ali: From your village to the school?
Carolina: um hmm….and it’s remote
Ali: When you say, “remote,” you mean it took a long time to get there?
Carolina: to get there walking
Ali: Yes, yes.

Such clarifications were a fairly common feature of my exchanges with the parents, and they seemed to have unlimited patience for my requests in this regard. Perhaps in addi-
tion to helping me in my goal to “get it right,” such requests also helped the parents to see me not just as a *maestra* but also as a lifelong learner like themselves, and maybe something of a peer, worthy of their confidence.

2.6 Determining Focal Settings and Focal Participants

My site selected, I now needed to focus on some sector or class(es) among Jefferson’s array of parent programming. A graduate student with more time in her schedule might have ideally set her sights on a variety of programs, but my personal circumstances limited such possibilities. As such, after two initial visits in May of 2003, I acted as a *maestra*, facilitator, and general volunteer as I participated in a variety programs at Jefferson from September, 2003 to June, 2004. During this first year, I observed a broader range of programs, including parent coffees, Spanish literacy classes, English classes, literature circles, and newspaper distribution meetings, among others. I also made regular visits to the youth center and local library. Following this period, during the second year of the study, I focused on a literature circle for one semester in the fall of 2004, and a basic Spanish literacy and oral English class for the second semester of 2004-2005, from January through June. Participating in these classes allowed me to interact with mothers on a regular basis (twice per week) and at the same time observe mothers with different levels of print literacy and formal education.

In determining focal participants, again, given my own constraints and my desire to understand the mothers as well as possible, I focused on mothers who attended the aforementioned focal programs, the literature circle of September-December, 2004, or the fundamental Spanish literacy class of January-May, 2005, most regularly during the focal periods. This focus meant that I had less opportunity to observe and interact with mothers who participated in other programs during the same time, or in similar programs in previous times. But again, given my own constraints and objectives, this decision made sense. I therefore observed and interacted with the mothers during their respective classes, and likewise interviewed them in 2005-2006.

Among these mothers, three frequently brought family members, such as spouses or children, to special events, and among these, two families invited me into their homes on several occasions. (It will become clear in Chapters 4 and 5 as to why the third mother did not invite me into her home.) I took advantage of the opportunity to meet and get to know other family members, but such opportunities were admittedly not evenly distributed across the group of focal mothers I interviewed. I therefore had more access to some homes, families, and family members than others. Based on this access to the mothers and family members, I came to focus on three families amongst the mothers I came to know. In addition, during classroom activities and school events, I focused on four additional mothers.

One could argue that my focus on mothers with regular attendance could skew my results; I was obviously concentrating on parents with maximum participation, at least in the conventional sense of the term. One should keep in mind, however, that numerous other mothers as well as some fathers at Jefferson regularly and noticeably participated in various parent programs—such as English classes, school committees, the migrants program, and coffees with the principal—as well as parent/child programs like the reading club and parent/child literature circles. I was hardly, then, skimming the cream of the crop, because there was a very large crop of active parents at Jefferson. For the three
years during which this study took place, in fact, Ernestina Olmedo reported hundreds of instances of parents participating in the one or another of these various programs.\(^2\) In short, if anything, one might argue that my sampling was too small to do justice to the many dedicated parents at Jefferson, but given my personal constraints as well as my desire to deeply understand a smaller group of parents, this small sampling made sense.

2.7 Data Collection

Data collection methods proceeded as follows: I generally took notes by hand during classes, and tape-recorded mental notes after classes, events, and home visits, transcribing hand notes as well as recorded notes shortly after each visit. In addition to these visits, I conducted, audiotaped, and later transcribed interviews with focal participants, family members, additional class participants, parent leaders, teachers, and school administrators during the whole of 2005 and throughout the 2005-2006 school year. A third data source came in the form of artifacts, such as drawing or writing tasks that the mothers completed in class and later shared with me, or flyers presented or passed out in class to announce school and community events.

On some occasions when asked to serve as a discussion facilitator for a dinámica social, I audiotaped the class, hoping to capture more of the dialogue than I would otherwise be able to take down while facilitating the dialogue. Videotape might have allowed me certain advantages, such as a view of gestures and other activities, as well as a larger, panoramic view of the classroom. However, because I was conducting research on adult subjects, not all of whom were documented, I was not comfortable with a video format, especially given the virulent anti-immigrant sentiment at that time. I did not want to frighten any parents, nor did I want to have in my possession potentially incriminating materials.

2.7.1 Classroom Participation and Observation

My activities during classroom visits took shape according to the kind of class and the needs presented there at any given time. Generally determined on an ad hoc basis at the request of Ernestina or a parent, I would act as a one-on-one tutor, group facilitator, class discussion leader or teacher, or sideline observer, and these activities in turn influenced my notetaking and/or audiotaping procedures.

2.7.2 Community Visits

In addition to regular classroom visits, I visited the Jefferson neighborhood to participate in community activities or simply to run errands. My community participation included joining District teachers and parents in a protest against education funding cuts; visiting the youth center to attend meetings of “Activas en la Comunidad,” a community action group for local women; and frequently visiting the local library branch to get materials in Spanish (for classroom and personal use) and to tutor interested parents during the

\(^2\) Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo documented approximately 400 instances of parent involvement in specific Jefferson programs on a yearly basis. However, there were parents who participated in multiple programs and thus were counted multiple times; other adults who attended basic literacy classes were not required to have children at Jefferson in order to participate, since 50% of the program’s funding came from City Hall. As such the exact number of specific Jefferson parents involved in these programs is difficult to gauge.
summer months of 2005. In addition, I frequented the Jefferson neighborhood whenever I needed authentic Mexican items, such as pastries, dulces, or piñatas less available elsewhere in the Valley. Such visits allowed me to get a feel for the neighborhood, its comings and goings, beyond the context of my classroom research. I tended to make only mental notes and just occasional hand-written notes during these visits, tape recording impressions on the drive home and typing them up upon my return from the field.

2.7.3 Home visits
Two of the three focal families in this study invited me into their homes. Both families were evicted from their homes during the course of the study, and I visited both at each of their respective residences for a total of 14 home visits during the study. Because of my full-time teaching schedule, I tended to have more time for such visits around the Christmas holiday and summer months. Sometimes I would phone ahead and then stop by. Other times the mother of the family might phone and invite me to drop by, or invite me over after class. I was able to attend the high school graduation and graduation party of the eldest daughter, Elda, of the Machado family, as well as Elda’s graduation from Del Valle Community College. I was not invited into the home of the Galarza family, although I did stop by there once to drop off some books. During home visits, I made mental notes, audio recorded impressions on the drive home, and typed up these head notes upon my return from the field.

2.7.4 Interviewing
I approached the interview process with hopes of getting at participants’ stories— their life stories (Linde, 1993), their views about these stories, and their views about other aspects of their lives. I prepared open-ended questions relating to their background and childhood experiences, immigration experiences, experiences with formal schooling and print literacy, and views on parenting and support of their children’s education.

In addition to classroom observations of focal participants, I conducted audiotaped interviews with focal mothers and, where possible, with family members as well. I also audiotaped hour-long interviews with Ernestina Olmedo on three occasions, and, on one occasion each, with then Principal Julio Serrano, former principal Andy Molina, and three teachers. I requested interviews from these teachers because each had had as a student a child of focal mothers whose families I had visited and gotten to know well, and in the case of one teacher, because she had also been a volunteer in the basic Spanish literacy class.

2.8 Data Analysis: Thematic Narrative As an Analytic Tool for Constructing Coherence
As I began the process of data analysis, I transcribed, or oversaw procedures and checked the transcriptions, of all hand notes and head notes as well as audiotapes of interviews and of classroom interaction. Early in the production of these transcriptions, I first engaged in open coding (Emerson et al., 1995) to see what themes emerged from the data. From there, I embarked upon more focused coding in an effort to discern patterns or regularities, as well as irregularities that might emerge from the data (Bogdan & Biklen,

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3 As noted in the Acknowledgements, I am eternally grateful to Eva Candelaria Elliott, in memoriam, and to Alex Scotta for their tireless help in producing transcriptions.
1998; Emerson et al., 1995). All along, I made marginal and parenthetical notes, both in the creation of typed fieldnotes as well as in the process of reading and rereading them.

During the process of data collection and transcription, I worked toward developing a thematic analysis and ultimately, a thematic narrative (Emerson et al., 1995), which required continually reviewing the data for indigenously suggested themes and checking their validity with study participants. In this continuing analysis, I focused on references to parent participation, whether actual activity (e.g., a mother expressing concern about her child’s academic progress and seeking advice during a parent class break), reports of activity (e.g., a participant’s report about conversing with a teacher or fellow parent), or participants’ views expressed about parent participation. Strictly speaking, I did not circumscribe a unit of analysis. To do so might have limited my perspective and impeded my ability to understand the parents’ viewpoints, present their stories, and ultimately analyze and organize these stories and observations in the form of a thematic narrative. Although it was clear to me that a potential unit of analysis could be instances of parent participation, what I intentionally left unclear was how this participation was to be defined. Because I wanted to know how the parents viewed parent involvement, I was reluctant to hone in on specific definitions or demarcations, except as expressed by the focal mothers themselves.

Designed to highlight and give full voice to participants’ stories about themselves, their understandings of those stories, and the themes highlighted therein, I saw thematic narrative as an effective analytic tool for understanding parents’ sense of what mattered to them, conveyed through their stories, often with compelling detail. Additionally, as an inductive form of analysis, the thematic narrative seeks to draw out the complexity of participants’ cultural understandings and social practice while seeking to shed light on the coherence inherent in these understandings and practices (Emerson et al., 1995). Like narrators and the life stories they tell, then, the thematic narrative seeks not only to recount participants’ stories, but also to relate these stories and their themes in order to provide greater insight into participants’ social understandings and histories of practice. Such insight is precisely what is needed if researchers and educators are to move beyond stereotyping and mythmaking as they seek to understand parents, particularly those parents who reside along society’s margins, as the mothers in this study.

Linde (1993:21), in fact, highlights the “life story” as a discourse phenomenon involving “extended reportability,” that is, a self-narrative in which the speaker expresses an evaluation about herself and which the speaker may recount repeatedly over long stretches of time. These narratives are significant because they convey “our sense of self—who we are, how we are related to others, and how we became that person” (Linde, 1993:219). As social beings, we use these stories in part to legitimate our membership within a given group, revealing “large-scale systems of social understanding and of knowledge that are grounded in a long history of practice” (Linde, 1993:219). Narratives, in short, “impose order on otherwise disconnected events” (Ochs & Capps, 1996:19), and the life story, in particular, creates “coherence” for the speaker as he makes sense of his life (Linde, 1993).

In addition to life stories, the lens of parent programming presented a unique and rarely explored view of what the parents can do in the classroom, a social space clearly dedicated to the practice of print literacy, to which many of the parents had had either limited access or access denied. Being in the classroom allowed a view of who felt “at
home” at school, that is, who felt comfortable in the classroom, when, and under what circumstances. Noticing how the parents participated in their own edification might—or might not—provide a window into how parents in turn participated in their children’s education as well. But what the classroom could provide, under the curriculum design of Ernestina Olmedo, was a generative space (Kalman, 2004a following Zboray, 1993) in which parents could voice their experiences, hopes, and concerns while simultaneously developing print literacies. In fact, parent participation through the lens of the classroom—like the parental voices that this study sought to air—has received scant attention in the literature, and Jefferson School provided a unique research opportunity to help fill that void.

3. Conclusion

Of the multiple studies of parent participation, too few have sought the input of those at the center of this subject—parents—and even fewer of those have done so seeking to reveal the insights, concerns, and practices of those parents typically marginalized in U.S. society, such as African-American, Latin@, immigrant, low-income, and/or parents with little or no formal education. This study, then, has sought to give voice to a group of parents from among the marginalized, and to do so expressly supported by methodological practices designed to allow the parents’ perspectives to take center stage. For “without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995: 58). The ethnographic approach applied in this study, including in-depth, open-ended interviews and long-term participant-observation (Érickson, 1986), as well as the use of life stories (Linde, 1993) in the construction of a thematic narrative analysis (Emerson et al., 1995), should help to reveal some of those “authentic voices” still surprisingly scant in the literature.
Chapter 4: Site and Participants

_I know this community. I love this community._
— Andy Molina, Former Principal, Jefferson School

1. Historical Background

Still thriving in today’s Silicon Valley, embedded in the daily lives of this study’s participants, is a racism that predates the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the U.S.’ war on Mexico but ushered in a new era of racism that continues to flourish (Pitti, 2003). The Treaty ended the U.S.’ military invasion but forced Mexico to relinquish half its terrain, which in turn increased the U.S.’ territory by one-third and included vast holdings of mineral-rich lands. Although within the annexed territories the Treaty guaranteed Mexicans the same political rights as those enjoyed by European-Americans (Valencia, Menchaca, & Donato, 2002) as well as Spanish language rights (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999), the rights of the newly minted Mexican-Americans were continually threatened and their lands seized (Pitti, 2003).

From the historical vantage point of many Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans, the substandard working and living conditions found disproportionately in their and other Latin@ communities (Hamman, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002; Hidalgo, 1999; McLaren, 2000) are manifestations of racism and neo-colonialism ushered in over 150 years ago (Macedo, 1999, 2000b; McLaren, 2000; Pitti, 2003). Although these events today receive little attention in history classrooms north of the border, they are deeply etched in the collective history of folks south of the border, of those who cross it, and of many who live here in the wake of these events.

For many of Mexican origin, the wave of anti-immigrant and anti-diversity legislation passed in California in the 1990s in the form of Propositions 187, 209, and 227, were merely new extensions of the old racism (Macedo 1999, 2000; Trueba, 1999). Passed in 1994 but later ruled unconstitutional by a U.S. district court, Proposition 187 sought to deny services, such as health, education, and welfare assistance, to undocumented immigrants. Proposition 209, however, passed in 1996 and is still on the books. It ended affirmative action in publicly funded institutions. Likewise, Proposition 227, passed in 1998, mandated English only immersion programs for immigrant students (except in cases where parents sign a waiver to request a bilingual program and one is available). As noted by Valdés (2001), only 34% of California’s 1.4 million English learners were enrolled in bilingual education programs at the passage of 227. Further, most bilingual education programs throughout the country, including California’s, are transitional programs designed to ease children into English over a brief period (Valdés, 2001), usually three years, as has been the case since the 1970s (August and Hakuta, 1997). Yet Arizona in 2000 followed suit and passed a similar ballot measure to abolish bilingual education, as did Massachusetts in 2002. Only Colorado, in 2002, defeated a similar proposition.

Yet more recently, in 2006, Colorado Congressman Tom Tancredo sought to criminalize not only the act of crossing the border but also that of aiding anyone who had (Bailley, 2006). Himself the grandson of an Italian immigrant, Tancredo and others have shown no sympathy toward today’s undocumented and have staunchly supported the construction of a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border, a provision signed into law by President Bush in October, 2006. The trend continues to thrive with Arizona’s
2010 law known as SB1070. Dubbed the “anti-invader law,” it requires state, county and city employees, including teachers, to verify documentation status wherever “reasonable suspicion” exists that a person may be undocumented. Additionally, failure to carry proof of legal residency renders anyone a trespasser. Such measures as we have seen in the last two decades to limit human rights, immigrant rights, language rights, and affirmative action, have allowed even high-profile politicians—from conservatives, such as Bush, Tancredo, and former California Governor Pete Wilson, to the more liberal President Clinton—to vocally bolster racism while touting the protection of democratic ideals (Macedo, 1999).

The jumbling of politics, language, and education, as in Propositions 187, 209, and 227, is also evident in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. NCLB has dramatically shifted the focus of many schools away from curricular and instructional improvement to “‘drill and kill’” teaching methods that address the Act’s “statistical gauntlet” imposed by the federal government (Darling-Hammond, 2007). During the period of this study, Jefferson School, like other U.S. schools, was caught in the wake of NCLB, except that Jefferson, as a low-income school with a high percentage of English learners, was especially vulnerable. As Linda Darling-Hammond explains:

…there is a Catch-22 for those [schools] serving English-language learners and special-needs students. In Alice in Wonderland fashion, the law assigns these students to special subgroups because they do not meet the proficiency standard, and they are removed from the subgroup as they catch up, so it is impossible for the subgroups ever to be 100 percent proficient. Schools serving a significant share of these learners will inevitably be labeled as failing, even if all their students consistently make strong learning gains. (2007:14)

Jefferson School, then, with 84% of its students classified as English learners (see below), had to contend with NCLB’s “statistical mousetrap” (Darling-Hammond, 2007) during the course of this study.

It should be clear, that political, governmental, and educational policies at the state and national level, all shaped by a history of racism, have likewise shaped the lives of the children and families of Jefferson School. I now shift focus to local phenomena—historical, economic, and political—in the Silicon Valley, el valle, itself.

1.1 Contrasting Perspectives of the Silicon Valley: Dividing Lines and Life in the Underbelly

Once commonly called the Santa Clara Valley and even known as “The Valley of Heart’s Delight” for its vast fruit orchards, the Silicon Valley today dominates the world market in computer products and Internet technologies. Gone are most of the old orchards whose patchwork graced the Valley’s landscape, replaced in the latter half of the 20th century with booming technology companies, freeway arteries, and ever more expensive and expansive luxury homes. Along with the resultant job growth has come population growth, up to more than two million at the turn of the 21st century, with the population of San José, the Valley’s largest city increasing from 200,000 in 1960 to 900,000 by century’s end (Silicon Valley, 2007). Likewise, the median price of a home in Santa Clara
County was double that of the national median for major metropolitan areas (Silicon Valley, 2007).

In stark contrast within this once bucolic valley stood the many migrant workers, primarily Mexican immigrants, who harvested its crops and lived in poverty while Anglos grew rich (Pitti, 2003). In the same vein, immigrant workers from Latin America as well as Asia have populated the Valley’s lowest-wage electronics jobs, at the same time providing support services such as janitorial, landscaping, and food preparation services that sustained the high tech boom of the 1990s and provided the backbone of an economy in whose riches they would not share. As detailed by Stephen Pitti in his *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, a chronicle of the rise and development of racism against the valley’s Mexican origin inhabitants, “The history of Latinos in Silicon Valley explodes local myths about the area’s universal prosperity and social peace” (2003:199). This social and historical backdrop, then, one in which a mask of racial and ethnic tolerance and of economic equity betrays a reality of vast underlying injustice, shapes the contemporary global setting in which the participants in this study enact their lives. They populate the Valley’s underbelly, a practically invisible place to those who’ve enjoyed the Valley’s prosperity, but a place of hardship, poverty, and racism for those who, with similar invisibility, operate within its confines. Yet beyond race, class, and poverty, still further dividing lines constrain the lives of this study’s participants: their residential status, and, for the focal participants, their female status.

Few of this study’s participants enjoyed legal residential status in the U.S. As such, the walls of the Valley’s underbelly circumscribed their movements further still. They went to work and came home, to school and home, to the doctor’s office or the market and home, without straying from those paths to places where they might stand out. As such, the invisibility of life in the underbelly can serve an ironic, dual role. On the one hand, it acts as a source of injustice, a mechanism through which workers, for instance, can receive lower pay with no rights and benefits. On the other hand, it also provides a source of protection: to remain invisible is to avoid deportation.

Yet even for those who enjoy documented status, racism is a reality, as the larger society continues to label them as “illegals.” As reported by the *San José Mercury News*, California residents of Mexican origin, including documented non-citizens, immigrants who are naturalized U.S. citizens, and Mexican origin U.S.-born citizens, are frequently stigmatized as “illegal aliens” despite their legitimate residential status, even though 70% of Mexican origin California residents are U.S. citizens (Olvera and Swift, 2007).

In addition to residential status, however, women who inhabit the underbelly experience an extra set of constraints. Indeed, women at all echelons of feminized workplaces typically receive lower pay and benefits, requirements for significant education and training notwithstanding. Teachers and nurses represent two such professions. But if women who are well-educated, documented workers find themselves at the short end of the pay-and-benefits stick, then so much more the undocumented woman in a low-skilled job, like several of the participants in this study. Similarly to their counterparts in the *maquiladoras* just south of the border, women assemblers in the Silicon Valley have been exploited in low-skill, low-pay jobs (Pitti, 2003).

In sum, many of this study’s participants led lives bounded not only by race, class, and poverty, but also by their undocumented status, real or assumed by the larger society, and their gender, traits that can collectively conspire, to render invisible the people who
bear them (Crenshaw, 1995). Parent programming at Jefferson School sought to counterbalance such limitations, to provide a place, a generative space (Kalman 2004a following Zboray, 1993) where, even within the Valley’s underbelly, parents would find inspiration and refuge as well as the strength to act as agents of change for their children and their communities.

1.2 Focal Site: Jefferson Elementary

Jefferson School is situated in the heart of Silicon Valley amidst a bustling immigrant community, five blocks away from a freeway that divides it from the white collar world of glossy downtown high rises, contemporary museums, posh theatres and restaurants, and plush office buildings. The multicolored storefronts of one- and two-story buildings in the Jefferson neighborhood stand in vivid contrast to the gray glass and steel buildings less than a quarter-mile away. In Jefferson’s vicinity a variety of structures contribute to the colorful and varied geography of the neighborhood: craftsman homes from the 1920s, in various states of renovation or disrepair; two-story apartment buildings from the 40s and 50s; Mexican bakeries; a collection of shops selling everything from wedding gowns to trophies; several liquor stores, taquerías, supermercados, a few used car lots; and a Catholic church, Holy Family, known by the locals as Sagrada Familia. In this neighborhood, people are frequently seen coming and going: adults with children in tow, children on bicycles, teens chatting on their way to or from school, the ice cream man strolling by with his cart, and the man who sells chicharrones (pork rind snacks) also from a wheeled cart.

The Jefferson Elementary School site is over 100 years old, its main building was constructed in the 1970s with another wing added in the 90s. The school grounds cover almost an entire city block, which it shares with its pre-school as well as a primarily Spanish language public library, known as la biblioteca, a free medical clinic, and a youth center, which also arrived in the mid 90s. According to Jefferson officials, before the construction of the library, that part of the block was home to a grocery store whose back lot served as a home for drug trafficking and prostitution at night, and gang activity was likewise prevalent in the neighborhood. Teachers and students were wary of leaving school after dark. But since the arrival of the library and adjacent youth center, Jefferson and its environs were much safer. Without this safety ushered in by the biblioteca and youth center, officials agreed, evening parent classes would have been much less likely.

Jefferson School itself enjoys an inviting atmosphere, due in part to the many bright mosaics and murals that cover its walls and blacktop. At the entrance of the school, a sign in Spanish and English welcomes students to Jefferson as a place where every student is college bound. At the entrance of the school, a sign in Spanish and English welcomes students to Jefferson as a place where every student is college bound. Inside the main gate, colorful mosaics feature national heroes, like famous presidents and leaders, including labor activist César Chávez. Other mosaics and murals represent the solar system and the 50 states. In addition, during my time at Jefferson, a mural of the school’s namesake, using the same likeness of Thomas Jefferson that one finds on a two-dollar bill, was painted large scale on the back wall of the stage in its cafeteria.
1.3 Statistical Information about Jefferson

State reports corresponding to the duration of this study, from 2003 through 2006, including Jefferson’s “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and “academic performance index” (API), show that Jefferson has been a predominantly Latin@, low-income school whose standardized test scores were rising yearly. Ethnically, reports from this period show Jefferson’s Latin@ population at an average of 95%. The school principal, Julio Serrano, reported in 2004 that Jefferson had just over 500 students in the kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5), with another 250 students at its adjoining pre-school. Economically, only 3 to 5 students among the nearly 400 K-5 students included in Jefferson’s API Base Reports from 2003 to 2005 were not listed as economically disadvantaged. And in terms of educational background, Jefferson parents were reported as likewise disadvantaged, with the average parent education level at Jefferson in 2003 listed as 1.5 out of 5 (where a score of 1 represents “not a high school graduate” and a score of 5 represents “graduate school”). Despite educational and economic disadvantages, however, Jefferson students performed relatively well in state standardized testing: their API increased steadily each year, nearly 50 points between 2003 and 2005. Still, Jefferson’s 2005 score in the low 600s (out of 1000) is considered comparatively low on a statewide basis, where it ranked as a 2 out of 10 (10 being best); and only a 4 among schools with similar demographic and student mobility rates. In terms of Jefferson’s AYP, a designation affirmed under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, Jefferson realized 13 of 17 criteria in 2004-2005, the first year that AYP was measured in comparison to the baseline established the previous year, achieving AYP in mathematics but not in language arts. All criteria, however, were met in 2005-2006 (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: AYP Data for Jefferson School, 2004-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) vis-à-vis No Child Left Behind (NCLB)</td>
<td>Proficient in Language Arts?</td>
<td>Proficient in Mathematics?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006: Made AYP</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005: Did not make AYP</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that 84% of Jefferson children were classified as English learners, and of these, 98% spoke Spanish as their primary language. Jefferson teachers, administrators, and staff likewise reflected the school’s ethnic makeup and linguistic needs: most were Mexican-American or otherwise Latin@ and handily bilingual. Both bilingual education and structured English immersion (SEI) were an integral component of Jefferson’s curriculum. Because Proposition 227 allowed the use of parent waivers to permit bilingual education, predominantly Spanish-speaking schools in the District had been able to continue their transitional bilingual education (TBE) program. Jefferson School employed a clearly outlined TBE program that first taught children to read in their native

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Spanish in kindergarten through first grade, providing 30% of instructional time in English and 70% in Spanish. The third grade was a pivotal year for the program, in that children were expected to be able “to read and write on grade level in…their primary language,” “to be orally fluent in English,” and to transition into English reading by the end of the third grade. By the fourth and fifth grades, students received 85% of instruction in English and only 15% of instruction in Spanish. Jefferson School’s bilingual education program received the Seal of Excellence from the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) in 2000. Some parents, however, requested instruction for their children entirely in English. In such cases, the District offered structured English immersion (SEI), where English immersion was to be accompanied by visual aids, teaching techniques, and language development activities designed to aid the acquisition of language along with academic content, in an effort to avoid the blow of straight sink or swim tactics.

1.4 Parent Programming at Jefferson

If Jefferson’s programs for educating its many English language learners were well elaborated and defined, then so was its parent programming extensive, varied, and unique. Funded equally by the District and City Hall, the school offered nine major programs during the period of this study, many of them ongoing over multiple weeks or semesters, often with different sources of material and financial support (Table 4.2). Jefferson sought out and took advantage of outside organizations’ initiatives to assist the school, as in the case of one local university that provided a parent course on a biennial basis, and in the case of another local university and community college whose students regularly acted as volunteer tutors for parents in basic Spanish literacy classes. At the same time, under the direction of Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo, classes from within the school itself offered a parent-centered, Freirean ([1993] [1970]) approach (see below) to parent programming, oriented to parents’ needs as well as their aspirations. Ernestina was very clear that the parent program at Jefferson was not intended to impart parents with specific skills that they would in turn transmit to their children. In fact, in describing the basic literacy classes at an orientation for volunteer teachers,

[Ernestina] said that she had researched many family literacy programs, and found many to be highly “skills-oriented.” One was funded by industry and ran like an assembly line. People, she said, were seen as objects, not as dynamic subjects, as thinking, feeling human beings. (Fieldnote excerpt, 9/4/2003)

Rather than focusing on skills, Ernestina’s Freirean approach sought to focus on the whole parent. At a meeting with parents and grant-writing volunteers Ernestina underlined Jefferson’s parent program’s goals

...to boost parents’ confidence and self-esteem, to help them create friendships, and to let them know that they have a voice. (Fieldnote excerpt, 4/7/2004)

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2 District Bilingual Education Office pamphlet, 2001-2002.
Clearly, for Ernestina engagement with print literacy was not an end in itself, but a mechanism for exploration of the self—of one’s identity, cultural values, and strongly held beliefs. Further, this engagement was to be realized through social interaction and networking that included and often centered around print. Parent programming, for Ernestina, could help the parents gain confidence by giving them a place, a generative social space, in which to firm their foothold in a new society, gaining a sense of belonging and legitimacy through interaction with print and with each other.

This philosophy was reflected in the vast array of Jefferson’s parent outreach and involvement programs, offering several types of classes and outlets for parent involvement. Most of these came about under Ernestina Olmedo’s oversight as Parent Coordinator, while others were sponsored by outside organizations (Table 4.2). In addition, childcare, funded by various sources such as the school, city, or district, was offered during nearly every program. And for those programs not accompanied by childcare, such as the weekly coffees with the principal and morning literature circles, parents simply brought along their children still too young to be in school: tots played quietly with toys provided in a corner of the classroom where meetings were held, and one mother simply held her newborn—from the time he was 11 days old—as she participated in parent literacy classes. What follows is a summary of the parent classes and activities that came under Ernestina’s supervision.

**Basic Spanish Literacy for Adults and Oral English:** These classes were designed for parents with little or no exposure to print literacy. During the 2003-2004 school year, they were offered on Monday and Wednesday evenings from 5:00 to 7:00. In 2004-2005, the schedule was changed to 4:00 to 7:00, with an additional hour used for oral English instruction, per the parents’ request. Typically, the portion of the class that focused on Spanish print literacy proceeded with a specific agenda guided by Freirean methodology (1993 [1970]). That is, class began with announcements about upcoming school and community events (e.g., District parent workshops, tax or legal workshops offered by local university volunteers, citizenship workshops, and school or community gatherings). Announcements were followed by introductions of any new members to the class. From here, class members read aloud a summary of the preceding class. Summaries of class discussions, usually typed and edited by Ernestina or a volunteer, also included parents’ written contributions resulting from the discussion of the previous class. From there, we proceeded to the dinámica social, a class dialogue surrounding a Freirean “codification” (1993[1970]), which we called a lámina. For us, the lámina was generally a transparency of a photograph, drawing, or other image (or series of images), placed on the overhead projector at the front of the class. Images were typically selected by Ernestina (and occasionally me) and related to a theme that parents, usually at the beginning of the semester, expressed interest in exploring. Although most themes were suggested by the parents, Ernestina likewise included themes relating to holidays that the children typically encountered in school, such as those relating to Martin Luther King Day and César Chávez Day. At the aforementioned volunteer teacher orientation, Ernestina described the lámina as follows:

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3 March 31 is César Chávez Day, a state holiday in California since 2001.
According to Paulo Freire, if you’re going to develop print literacy, you need to use the language of the culture and people. Artifacts [such as láminas] are the media of the encounter [the dinámica social]. At least two people should appear in the lámina, at least one with whom the learner can identify, and the lámina should address a “problem” or issue of importance to the learner. You build print literacy, Ernestina said, based on the experience of the learner. (Fieldnote excerpt, 9/4/2003).

Ernestina had a bank of these transparencies or láminas, which frequently related to child and family issues. A favorite component of this transparency bank was a series of depictions by Chicana costumbrista artist Carmen Lomas Garza, whose paintings portray the artist’s family in traditional scenes from her youth, such as making tamales together, or attending a quinceañera or local fair. Other láminas presented by Ernestina included scenes of a community clean-up day and of a mother reading to an attentive infant.

Following the dinámica social’s discussion of the “generative theme” (Freire, 1993 [1970]), the class would suggest words that emerged from the dialogue, and Ernestina would list them on the board. She would then choose a “generative word” from among them, which would be divided into syllables and then permuted using the five Spanish vowels. Parents then pronounced the resultant syllables, first singly and then in combination with other syllables, with Ernestina pointing to indicate which syllable combinations should be read. Parents then suggested what real words could be created by combining the various syllables. Below is an example of one such declension of the generative word palabra (“word”):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PA</th>
<th>LA</th>
<th>BRA</th>
<th>Syllables combined to form other words:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>pa</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>bra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>pe</td>
<td>le</td>
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<td>O</td>
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<td>bro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>pu</td>
<td>lu</td>
<td>bru</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

papa, papá, pala, palo
pela, pele, pelé, pelo…

From there, parents frequently wrote sentences or paragraphs (according to their abilities and aid needed/available) in regard to the dinámica and generative word. Those parents unable to write sentences without help would typically be aided by a volunteer tutor. Parents willing to share their ideas with others could contribute their sentences to the volunteer assigned to compile the class results in a handout for the next class.

Such was the general layout of the basic parent print literacy classes. At times, however, children’s books in Spanish, whether translations of books originally written in English as well as Spanish/English bilingual books and original books in Spanish, were used to foster print literacy and promote discussion, much in the style of a literature circle.

Literature Circles: Various series of literature circles were offered at Jefferson during my time there, some for parents only, others for parents and children. During the literature circles, we read and discussed children’s or young adult fiction in small groups. Ernestina selected our readings based on the values presented therein, values that often reflected Mexican culture and therefore rang true for the parents, affirming their cultural
identity and giving them helpful “ammunition”—books—in their efforts to maintain their cultural bearings while adapting to life in the U.S. “Stories don’t just teach reading,” Ernestina would say, “they teach values.”

Based on Alma Flor Ada’s (1988) Pájaro Valley model, each class reading was followed by a four-phase discussion, usually in small groups:

1. Descriptive Phase: summarizing the who, what, when, where, how, and why of the story
2. Interpretive Phase: giving opinions about the story, and expressing contrasts found within it
3. Critical/Multicultural Phase: examining the strengths and weaknesses of the story’s characters and their responses to events in their lives
4. Creative/Transformative Phase: relating the story to one’s own life, discussing lessons underscored in the story and learned in one’s own life as well as the story’s impact.

These phases were summarized in Spanish on bookmarks that Ernestina gave to class members to help guide our discussions. In addition to readings and discussions, literature circles also featured an emphasis on learning strategies and games that parents could use with their children at home. Strategies included using the senses (sight, sound, touch, smell) as tools for interpreting a story, and asking questions about a story instead of only seeking answers.

Each literature circle typically lasted from eight weeks to a full semester and was offered once or twice a week, e.g., Thursday mornings for parents or Wednesday afternoons for parents and children together. Like the basic Spanish literacy courses, literature circles tended to address themes in which parents had expressed interest, such as child self-esteem, child learning, and preparing for adolescence. During the course of this study, I visited a literature circle/learning strategies workshop held on Thursday mornings during the fall semester of 2003, and likewise facilitated a literature circle designed for parents with previous exposure to print literacy, in the fall semester of 2004. At the end of each session, parents could and frequently did check out books to bring home to share with the family.

Café con el director / Coffee with the principal : Each Tuesday Principal Julio Serrano met with parents for about 30 minutes starting at 8:15, after he had led the children in their general school assembly on the blacktop. Ernestina likewise facilitated these meetings, held in a small classroom, and when other pressing business led him away, Ernestina finished the meetings as well. Parents frequently lingered and socialized over coffee afterward, till about 9:00 a.m. or so, but some would stay a little longer to read and check out books from the modest library Ernestina had assembled in a four-by-four-foot bookcase. Usually, at least 20 parents attended—mostly mothers and occasionally a few fathers as well.

Topics discussed at the coffees tended to center around upcoming events as well as issues of concern to parents. At one meeting, for instance, Principal Serrano announced an event—a District-sponsored series of four parent workshops. Parents who attended all four would receive complimentary tickets to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Alma Rivera, an experienced school and community leader and mother of a Jefferson fifth-grader, ad-
vised parents to use the complimentary passes for older family members, since children’s admittance fees were much lower. Such sharing of the ins-and-outs of school and community operations was common at parent classes and meetings at Jefferson.

While some coffees centered on announcements of upcoming events, others focused on parent concerns. At one such meeting, fifth-grade parents expressed apprehension over their children’s middle school assignment for the coming year. In answer to their concerns, Ernestina invited an official from the middle school to come and talk to parents the following week. Occasionally, Ernestina invited such guests and community members to the coffees. Another such guest was the president of the local Jefferson Neighborhood Association, invited to announce an organizational meeting in support of efforts to get more lighting to cover Jefferson’s playground and surrounding streets at night, an effort to provide greater safety in the neighborhood.

Some parents reported to me that the coffees had served as their entrée into the doings of Jefferson School. It was through the coffees with the principal that they socialized with other parents, forged friendships, and learned about other school programs for themselves and their children. Such social networking, the parents reported, frequently led to further involvement, such as participation in parent classes and/or community activities. As Bourdieu’s theory would predict, the parents’ development of social capital enabled them to develop further social capital, in the form of increased social connections, and cultural capital, in terms of educational and community involvement activities. On a typical Tuesday, in fact, it was common for mothers to attend the school assembly on the blacktop before school, the Café con el Director at 8:15, and the 9 o’clock meeting of “Activas en la Comunidad” (Women Active in the Community), a local group of immigrant women and other neighborhood boosters, including Alma Rivera, who met regularly at the nearby youth center. Clearly the work schedules of some mothers did not permit such continuous activities, but for those who were homemakers or whose work schedules allowed, such involvement was commonplace. So what got them to the coffees in the first place? Many mothers reported that, upon walking their children to school, they would frequently come into contact with a smiling Julio Serrano or Ernestina Olmedo, welcoming them to Jefferson and inviting them to attend the café. After repeated invitations, even the shyest of mothers in this study felt encouraged to attend, and did.

Club de Lectores / Readers Club: An early morning reading club focused on children targeted for reading improvement, this program made heavy use of parent volunteers. The club met daily at 7:30-8:10 a.m. before classes and ran in 8-week cycles. As of 2005-2006, it replaced the afternoon literature circles for parents and children, offered in 2003-2004, since the early morning schedule suited working parents’ schedules. Because this program was designed for selected students targeted for reading improvement, some mothers, such as Alma Rivera, volunteered even though their children did not participate in the program. Other mothers who volunteered, like Rosa Anaya, requested that their children be allowed to participate in the program even though they hadn’t been selected for it, and their children were thus admitted to the program as well. The Club de lectores was instituted later in the course of this study and so was not used as a focal site.

Weekly newspaper distribution: Parents helped Ernestina sort and distribute 450 bilingual newspapers weekly. Parents helped deliver the papers to classrooms for children to bring home to their parents, based on parent requests. Ernestina reported that only two teachers, who taught English immersion classes, declined to participate in the program. In
In addition to the above programs, Jefferson also benefited from additional English classes and a migrants program, provided by outside entities (Table 4.2). These programs were not examined in this study.

Over and above the regularly scheduled programs and classes listed in Table 4.2, Jefferson put on various special events, such as a Halloween haunted house, Thanksgiving turkey dinner, Easter egg hunt, and swap meets, which were regularly announced at parent classes and enjoyed substantive parental support. Parents likewise frequently at-
tended the outdoor assemblies held before school each morning. More like pep rallies, the assemblies were capped off by a rousing school cheer, led by Principal Serrano, who exhorted students to do well in school today and go to college in the future.

As well as Jefferson’s many programs primarily for parents, the school likewise boasted an impressive array of co-curricular and other programs for students, including preschool, an after-school homework club, mariachi band, folkloric dance troop, cheerleading squad, violence prevention program, and youth sports program. In addition, Jefferson administrators made it a point to establish community contacts with the Jefferson Neighborhood Association, the Rotary Club, the local museum, public library, youth center, and health clinic, to support its students and local families, and Jefferson likewise looked to parents to help support these and related activities. Mothers, for instance, sewed dance costumes, assisted medical personnel during school sight and hearing testing for children, prepared meals for pot luck dinners, and staffed the school “store,” where children purchased prizes with “tickets” earned for good behavior. I now introduce the parents who helped support and energize Jefferson’s many programs.

2. Meet the Parents

Because parent programming at Jefferson was funded equally by the District and City Hall, classes at Jefferson, most notably its evening classes, were open to any resident of Silicon City, even those whose children were now grown or who attended other elementary, middle, and high schools in the area. Some class members, in fact, did not have children. Still, Ernestina geared the class toward the needs of Latin@ immigrant parents of school-aged children, the profile that reflected most class members.

This study followed three focal mothers, Carolina Sandoval, Lupe Machado, and Margarita Galarza, and, to the extent possible, their families. In addition, it focused on four other focal parents, all of them Mexican immigrant mothers with school-aged children: Rosa Anaya, Mercedes Otero, Helena Contreras, and Alma Rivera, the latter two of them described as school leaders by Ernestina Olmedo, Julio Serrano, and several parents. Among this second group of four mothers, I was able to observe and interact significantly only with the mothers and not their families. Remaining participants consisted of 30 non-focal parents, Jefferson Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano, former Principal Andy Molina, and three teachers with a focal child in their classroom: Celia Luna, Josefina Garza, and Laura Barajas. Ms. Luna had been the fourth-grade teacher of Juanito Sandoval, Carolina’s son, and Ms. Garza, the first-grade teacher of Sophie Machado, Lupe’s daughter. Laura Barajas had been a volunteer instructor for the basic Spanish literacy classes as well as third-grade teach to Juanito Sandoval. I shall now describe this cast of participants in greater detail, including summaries in table form (Tables 4.3, Participant Families; 4.4, Focal Mothers; and 4.5, Participant Teachers and Administrators).
2.1 Carolina Sandoval and the Sandoval Family

Carolina Sandoval was 42 years old when I met her in December of 2004. A petite, smiling woman with short, jet black hair that she wore pulled back in a ponytail or braids, Carolina had been in the U.S. for less than a year, having immigrated from her native Michoacán in March of that year. She arrived with three of her four children, her son-in-law, and two grandchildren. Her husband, Juan, 43, a skilled builder and bricklayer, and her elder son, Lucas, 18, had immigrated nearly two-and-a-half years previously to work and save enough money to pay a coyote, at $1500 a head, to get the rest of the family across the U.S.-Mexico border.

A homemaker par excellence, Carolina concerned herself primarily with the family’s nutrition and well being, and indeed, with the nutrition of everyone who passed through her front door, myself, my daughter, and neighborhood visitors included. From fresh-frozen grapes in the summer to a delicious hot fava bean soup in the winter, Carolina never allowed me to leave her home without giving me a nutritious bite to eat. As for family members themselves, Carolina rose at 5:00 each morning to prepare breakfast and a sack lunch for family members going off to work. She then walked the children back-and-forth to school. Son Juanito, a Jefferson third-grader, and granddaughter Lydia, a Jefferson pre-schooler, attended Jefferson School on different schedules, necessitating that Carolina walk to and from Jefferson a total of nearly 4 miles each day to escort the children to school. In addition, she walked to and from class two evenings per week, almost an additional mile.

When I met the Sandovals, the family had recently moved out of a cramped apartment shared with non-family members, and, pooling the salaries of Juan, Lucas, Lucas’ sister Soledad, 23, and her husband, Eduardo, 25, were able to rent a small house about half a mile from Jefferson School. One of Juan’s brothers, recently injured when a car ran over his foot, also lived with them. There were not enough beds and bedrooms for everyone, however, and so Juan’s brother slept on blankets on the hardwood floor of the living room, and Soledad and her family slept in the basement. Still, Carolina was thrilled now to be living only with family members, “toda la familia nomás…la pura familia” (all and only family…just family). Later in the study, Juan’s brother returned to Mexico and another of Juan’s brothers moved in along with his wife, Carolina and Juan’s sister-in-law, Eva. Both Carolina and Eva attended the basic Spanish literacy and oral English classes at Jefferson regularly. Neither had had formal education or academic exposure to print literacy prior to their attendance at Jefferson.

When I first visited their home, Carolina and Juan had been married 25 years. Unlike Carolina, Juan had received some schooling, attending the first grade with small children, at times the butt of jokes because of it, when he was 13 years old. A tall, trim man with a ready smile and a firm handshake, Juan was pleased with what he had ac-

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4 Families frequently did not share the same last name. That is, mothers frequently used their birth surnames, while their husbands and children used the husband’s surname. The common practice in Mexico would be for a married woman to use her birth name followed by her husband’s last name, but upon integration into the U.S., it appears that many women drop the husband’s last name and use only their birth surname, following the U.S. tradition in part by only using one last name. For the sake of the reader’s keeping track of family members, however, I have grouped families under the mother’s last name, even in the case of Eduardo Sandoval, Carolina and Juan Sandoval’s son-in-law.
accomplished in the United States after years of hardship in Mexico. In one backyard conversation that they permitted me to audiotape, Carolina and Juan recalled with wistful smiles how young and in love they had been despite the difficulties of setting up house and starting a family in their impoverished village in Michoacán during the early years of their marriage. “Me pega loco ella” (I was crazy in love with her), Juan recalled laughing. Carolina joined in his laughter, but continued to soberly describe the difficult conditions of those first years:

Carolina: No teníamos pa’ los frijoles, maestra, pa’ comer. Me acuerdo bien que no teníamos ni pa’ comer frijoles o hacer frijoles no teníamos. Pobres, no teníamos qué comer y así…
Juan: una casita, hice una casita
Carolina: de madera
Juan: de madera palitos redondos así. Yo la hice…y con cartón la tapamos y allí viví y empecé a [decirme] n’hombre yo tengo que hacerme otra casita mejor.

Carolina: We didn’t have [enough money even] for beans to eat, maestra. I remember well that we didn’t have even enough to eat beans or make beans. Poor things, we didn’t have [food] to eat and so…
Juan: …a house, I built a house
Carolina: of wood
Juan: of wood [with] round sticks like that. I made it with cardboard for a roof and there I [we] lived and I began to [tell myself], man, I’ve got to make myself another, better house [than this].

Not only did Juan build that better house, but along with his brother, he successfully drilled a well to bring water to the half-hectare of land his mother had given him. He attempted to grow corn on the land, but some time after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, a glut of U.S. corn had begun to arrive and drive down the price of Mexican corn, left to rot in warehouses. Juan later decided to give up on corn and instead successfully planted avocado trees and harvested a respectable crop, but an unscrupulous banker raised interest rates on the seed money Juan had borrowed, citing a contract that Juan could not read, so that try as he might, Juan’s harvest, however strong, never netted enough income for the family. Ultimately, such conditions led to Juan’s decision to immigrate to the U.S.:

Juan: Yo a gusto aquí porque tengo trabajo. Si no, no estaba aquí. Y también porque lo que gano con mi trabajo me alcanza pa’ vestir pa’ comer pa’ pagar renta y me sobra poquito. Yo allá [en México] no, no me sobraba…ni para comer me quedaba, ¿no? Y era [de] los que ganaban supuestamente bien porque era albañil allá, y no me alcanzaba. Allá un pantalón vale 200 pesos, vale 200 pesos, pero ¿quién gana 150 el día? ¿50 pesos? ¿Dónde está la diferencia? ¿Dónde está? Si aquí vale [el pantalón] 18 dólares, en dos horas gano para comprarlo.

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5 Juan’s firsthand account is corroborated by the literature, cf. Fanjul and Fraser (2003), and Henriques and Patel (2004).
Juan: I’m happy here because I have work. If not, I wouldn’t be here. And also because what I earn with my work is enough [to pay] for clothing, food, rent, and I have a little left over. And there [in Mexico] I didn’t have enough left over even [for the family] to eat, you know? And I was one of those who supposedly earned a good living because I was a bricklayer there, but it wasn’t enough. There a pair of pants costs 200 pesos, it costs 200 pesos, but who earns [even] 150 pesos a day, 150 pesos? Where’s the difference? Where is it? If here [the pair of pants] costs $18, in two hours I earn enough to buy them.

In the U.S., Juan had found steady work in construction and bricklaying for a family with a large piece of land in the foothills of Los Gatos, an affluent suburb at the southwestern tip of the Silicon Valley. The family had started a winery on their property, and Juan was in charge of its construction. When construction was completed, the family referred Juan to two other families with large properties they wished to develop. Juan showed me a photo album of his work, which appeared to be of very high quality. It was no wonder, then, that he was continuously employed. Juan mentioned with pride that he paid his taxes and was pleased to be here in the U.S., where his younger children attended school.

Lucas, however, the elder of Carolina and Juan’s two sons and their second child, did not attend school in the U.S. when he arrived here at age 16. Instead he worked alongside his father when there was sufficient work, and if not, he lined up with other immigrant men outside a local home improvement store, where they waited in the hopes of being picked up for a day’s labor. A cordial and respectful young man, Lucas had wanted to work and asked his father to accompany him to the U.S. in order seek opportunity, which, like his father, he found lacking in their native Michoacán.

Lucas’ older sister, Soledad, was the eldest of Carolina and Juan Sandoval’s four children. She and Eduardo had two children: Lydia, age 4 and a Jefferson pre-schooler, and Eduardito, age 2.

As Soledad explained, however, the family’s first migration away from their rural rancho (village) was not to the U.S., but rather to the city of Zamora, which, at a population of 400,000, is one of Michoacán’s larger cities. Soledad was herself just a girl at the time, about 6 years old, when her parents had decided to leave the rancho, hoping for a better education for her and Lucas, she said. (Her other two siblings had not yet been born.) Soledad also recalled how bleak life had been on the rancho. To illustrate, she recounted how Lucas had been born prematurely, so the family fashioned a makeshift incubator for him by filling bottles with water—heated on their brick stove—and arranging these bottles around the baby. Life on the rancho was undeniably sparse, but in contrast, the ingenuity required for the Sandoval family to survive there had been abundant indeed. Moving to Zamora brought the hope of a better education, medical services, and work opportunities, said Soledad. As such, the Sandoval children had been educated in Zamora, and both she and Lucas had completed the eighth grade there. Now in the U.S., Soledad provided housekeeping part-time to the same family for whom Juan had done so much construction. In addition, during harvesting periods, she helped pick grapes alongside her employer, a retired Spanish teacher whose language faculties allowed her to communicate with Juan, Lucas, and Soledad. This woman had also served as something of a mentor to Soledad and encouraged her to attend school and learn English. Soledad and Eduardo attended evening classes in English at a local adult school. Upon completing
sufficient coursework in English, Soledad planned to earn a high school general education diploma (GED) there as well.

Carolina’s two school-aged children were Maribel, 13, an eighth-grader at Williams Middle School, and Juanito, age 9, a third-grader at Jefferson. In the three-year period of this study, Maribel attended three schools: Williams Middle School as an eighth-grader, Williams High School as a freshman, and then South Valley High School after the family was evicted and forced to move during the summer before her sophomore year. Maribel, a pretty young woman with curly black hair, bright eyes, and a warm smile, seemed to take the transitions in stride, despite some difficult bumps encountered along the way. As it turned out, South Valley High had a reputation for gang activity, and some girls at her new school accused Maribel of giving them a “funny look,” and so they beat her up, even though Maribel didn’t recall “looking” at them at all. When Maribel got home and told the family what happened, Carolina was incredulous. Soledad immediately phoned the school to report the incident, and the girls who started the fight were expelled. When the family told me what had happened, I looked into the possibility of a transfer for Maribel to Silicon Valley College Preparatory (SVC Prep). A primarily Latin@ charter high school in the same school district, SVC Prep specialized in preparing high school students for college. Two children from another of my focal families, the Machados (below), had been attending SVC Prep and liked it very much. But the admissions counselor there informed me that Maribel was still studying English as a second language (ESL), which was not included in SVC Prep’s curriculum. If she did transfer to SVC Prep, the counselor said, then Maribel, now in the middle of her sophomore year, would have to enroll as a freshman. When I passed along the information, Juan and Carolina said they felt that Maribel would now be safe at South Valley, since the girls who had started the fight were expelled, and that she should stay put there.

As for Maribel’s English, it was normal and certainly understandable that after only five semesters of instruction in the U.S., she would continue to be more comfortable with print literacy in Spanish, in which she had had seven years of instruction. In fact, when I brought her novels to read in English and Spanish as well as bilingual books, Maribel said she mostly enjoyed reading the novels in Spanish, since it was more natural for her. She especially liked Isabel Allende’s novel Zorro, which I had given her one Christmas. I took Maribel’s enjoyment of reading in Spanish as a good sign and a solid foundation upon which she could continue her education. I expressed my hope to Carolina and Juan that Maribel could attend a community college if necessary, until her English was sufficiently advanced to attend a four-year university. Her parents seemed surprised, reacting with raised eyebrows, that their daughter might be able to attend college. They had told me repeatedly, as had Soledad, that in Mexico only well-to-do youth could expect to attend college, and those of the lower classes who managed to earn college degrees, they said, typically could not find work after graduation, because they didn’t have the proper social connections. In fact, they said, this had happened to a nephew of Juan’s who had studied medicine but could not find work as a doctor. In addition, as a teenager, both Carolina and Juan complained that Maribel was becoming muy corrajuda (very contentious). For them, as for the Mexican origin parents in Valdés (1996) and the working-class Anglo parents in Lareau (2000), a good student had to be well-behaved. Still, although surprised, their curiosity was piqued, and they listened attentively as I told them
about different options beyond high school, including community colleges and four-year state universities nearby, that could accept an undocumented student like Maribel.

After Maribel came Carolina’s youngest child, Juanito, who must have inherited his father’s height, as he seemed a rather tall boy for just 9 years of age when I first met him in the spring of 2005. In addition to his stature, he also possessed the broad smile and dark, dancing eyes that ran in the rest of the family. Juanito was an active yet attentive boy. Whenever I visited his home, he always seemed to be skating, riding a bicycle, or just back from a soccer game, sweat pouring from his head with its straight black crew cut, and beaming from ear to ear. As active and athletic as he was, however, he would drop everything to come to greet me, and, upon his parents’ request, immediately perform some school-like activity as a demonstration for “la maestra.” Indeed, as I noted during one interview at the Sandoval home:

Juanito’s parents encouraged him to read the permission letter [to participate in an interview with me] in English, even though it was available in Spanish as well. Juanito read the letter (a full page, single-spaced) in its entirety, and did not shy away from less familiar words like “research.” Carolina and Juan beamed with pride. (Interview note excerpt, June 21, 2006)

Juanito was a delightful child. On my first visit to the Sandoval home, I noticed that the family didn’t seem to have enough beds for everyone, and I happened to have two twin mattresses to give away. I asked Carolina and Juan if they could use the mattresses. They replied that they could, and I delivered the mattresses a short time later. When I saw Juanito a few months afterward at an awards ceremony for the parent classes, Juanito thanked me gleefully, saying that on cold nights, he slept on the mattress to stay warm, but on very hot nights, he slept on the floor to keep cool. Juanito apparently had developed the family knack for ingenuity and adaptability.

In sum, the Sandoval family consisted of three generations living together and sharing the duties of one household. All adult family members worked outside the home, with the exception of Carolina, who took charge of the family’s nutritional needs and transported the younger children separately to and from school each day, walking nearly four miles a day.

2.2 Lupe Machado and the Machado Family

Like Carolina Sandoval, Lupe Machado, 43, was a diminutive woman in her early forties, hailed from a Michoacán village, and had four children. Also like Carolina, Lupe was a kind and cheerful woman with a small frame, dark eyes, and a gleeful smile. But unlike Carolina, who had only two children attending school during the study, Lupe had four school-aged children, ranging from Sophie, age 5, a Jefferson kindergartner, to Elda, age 17, a high school junior at SVC Prep. Between Sophie and Elda were Benjamín, age 12 and in the sixth grade at Harding Middle School, and Paloma, 16, a sophomore, also at SVC Prep. Lupe was married to Diego Machado, 41, a construction worker. Diego was the father of the two younger children and stepfather to Elda and Paloma.

Lupe differed from fellow michoacana Carolina in several other key respects. With respect to time in the U.S., for instance, Lupe had a good deal more experience here than Carolina. Lupe first immigrated to the U.S. in 1990, returning to Mexico and then back to the U.S. two more times in the early 90s. All told, Lupe had lived in the Valley for nearly
13 years. Her two youngest had been born here, and the two oldest had been raised here since the ages of 3 years and 8 months, respectively.

Lupe, in fact, represented the third generation in her family to migrate back-and-forth to live and work in California. Her grandfather had participated in the Bracero program of the fifties, and Lupe and her parents had likewise been migrant farmworkers in the U.S. Lupe, in fact, had been the eldest of 10 children and had intermittently acted as principal caregiver in Mexico for her younger siblings from the time she was 14, when her parents began as migrant workers, until she herself migrated to California in her late twenties. Yet despite this long, steady work history on the part of Lupe and previous generations of her family, she did not enjoy documented status in the U.S. Indeed, of all Lupe’s siblings, only the youngest, Paula, was documented, as she had been born in the U.S. When Paula votes, Lupe once told me, she votes for the entire family.

Lupe differed from Carolina in other important ways: where Carolina was a homemaker, Lupe worked outside the home as a janitor at an electronics company. And where Carolina’s first encounter with print literacy was at Jefferson School, Lupe had attended school through the third grade in Mexico and was later able to earn a primary school completion certificate, the equivalent of a sixth-grade education, by attending adult school in her later teens. She had also attended trade school to become a seamstress.

Likewise, Lupe’s children, the two oldest having immigrated when very young, and the two youngest born in the U.S., had a perfect command of English, and along with that came educational opportunities unavailable to Maribel Sandoval, Carolina’s teenaged daughter. Elda and Paloma attended SVC Prep, and Benjamin had been accepted there by the end of this study. Still, if the Machado children were not limited by certain educational circumstances, economic limitations still held sway. Elda, for instance, a beautiful young woman with striking indigenous features—dark, almond eyes, an aquiline nose, and long jet black hair—was a student leader at SVC Prep who earned A’s and B’s. She was accepted to a Cal State University (CSU) campus in Southern California but could not attend, as her family could not afford the tuition, room, and board. Elda took it in stride, however. She chose to attend Del Valle Community College, a highly regarded school, and she hoped that from there she could transfer to UCLA as a junior. She wanted to study history, political science, and anthropology, and was interested ultimately in a career in law.

Lupe’s second daughter, Paloma, was also a striking young woman, with long straight brown hair and a fabulous ear-to-ear smile. Lupe did not consider Paloma to be as serious a student as Elda, but Paloma’s educational goals were admirable nevertheless. In fact, it was Paloma who, through a friend, first learned of SVC Prep, applied, and was accepted. A few weeks into the new school year, Elda then followed suit. Paloma hoped to attend Cal Poly and major in business.

As for younger brother Benjamin, he was unhappy with his mother’s insistence that he attend SVC Prep after middle school, because his friends would be attending South Valley High. Lupe, however, insisted that Benjamin attend SVC Prep, his best opportunity, as she saw it, to prepare for college. She was delighted that Benjamín had been accepted there.

Little Sophie, a five-year-old kindergartner, was a bundle of energy. Tall for her age and very wiry, Sophie had Elda’s striking physical features, along with a generous dose of spunk. Because she encountered plenty of Spanish at home, Lupe reasoned she should
enroll Sophie in an English immersion classroom instead of the transitional bilingual education program more prevalent at Jefferson. Although Lupe herself did not read and write in English, and her spoken English was quite limited, she knew that her older daughters would help Sophie with her homework, and so she had no worries about Sophie getting the homework support she would need in an English-speaking classroom.

The Machado family faced a number of challenges during the period of this study. First, Lupe had injured her back on the job when she tried to pick up a deceptively heavy bag of trash. After that, she couldn’t go to work for several weeks while her back healed. This dealt a severe financial blow to the family, especially at a time when Diego’s work in construction was on the wane due to winter weather. To make matters worse, later in the year, a construction accident left Diego, an undocumented worker like Lupe, in crutches, and he was out of work again. During periods when Lupe’s and Diego’s jobs were stalled due to injuries or weather, the family received no income or disability. While her back healed, however, Lupe let no moss grow under her feet: she used the extra time to attend the basic Spanish literacy classes, attend coffees with the principal, and join Activas en la Comunidad, a community booster group for women. During classes, Lupe would frequently get up to stand in the back of the room to give her back a rest from sitting. When her back healed for a time and she returned to full-time work, she had to set aside many of these activities, but she still participated as a volunteer for the Club de Lectores and attended open houses, parent conferences, and other parent meetings at Jefferson and Harding Middle School, as well as various parent meetings SVC Prep in preparation for Elda’s graduation from high school.

A second and still more severe blow hit the Machado family in February of 2006, when, with just a day’s notice, they were evicted from their apartment, which they shared with Lupe’s sister Ana, Ana’s husband, and their baby. I recalled that when I had previously visited the Machado home, on the top floor in the back of an old Victorian converted into apartments, the back stairs leading to their apartment seemed uneven and definitely not built to code. Apparently a city inspector had noticed something similar. In any case, it turned out that the apartment had no permit, and the city’s eviction notice took immediate effect. As such, the Machado family was forced to vacate their apartment within 24 hours. With nowhere to go, the family split up in pairs, with two each living with different relatives. Before the family found another apartment, Elda and Paloma even lived with an SVC Prep teacher for a few weeks. For little Sophie, however, the mid-winter eviction and frequent moves took a physical toll, leaving her with an oozing ear infection that even her first-grade teacher, Ms. Garza, had noticed. The family did not have medical insurance then, so Lupe requested time off work to take Sophie to doctor appointments she was able to arrange at the local free clinic. Despite gaining permission ahead of time to leave work, Lupe was still given a formal warning—after the fact—that she was not to take off any more time. Fortunately, Sophie’s ear eventually healed, and Lupe was able to hang on to her job. After about six weeks, the family found an apartment and settled in together once again.

The Machado family, then, had struggled a great deal. Life had dealt them a series of blows that threatened their health, wages, and shelter. Further, as undocumented workers, they had little of the social recourse that documented workers could take advantage of. Luckily, they could avail themselves of the local free medical clinic, and better still, Lupe’s large, extended family and even a teacher from SVC Prep, to shelter them during
their gravest challenge. That assistance, coupled with their own admirable resilience, allowed them to weather the storm.

2.3 Margarita Galarza and the Galarza Family

At age 55, Margarita Galarza was the oldest mother among my focal families, and only the youngest of her four children, a son, was still in high school when the study began. Given her age and that of her children, I might have considered her somewhat beyond the parent profile for my study. But from the time I met Margarita on my first visit to Jefferson’s basic Spanish literacy class, I felt she was just too compelling to set aside. Margarita impressed me in many ways, with her sweet smile, wide brown eyes, and giggly sense of humor, her intense work ethic, and impeccable class attendance. But what impressed me most about Margarita was her dogged insistence, after 50 years of access denied to formal education, that somebody give her a chance. I couldn’t help but admire her andgravitate to her at every opportunity.

The night I met Margarita in June of 2003, Ernestina had asked members of the basic Spanish literacy class to fill out a year-end evaluation of the program. Volunteer tutors helped parents whose level of print literacy did not allow them to understand the survey, and Ernestina requested that I work with Margarita:

_I read the various questions of the survey to Margarita. Since it seemed to apply more to people whose children attended Jefferson Elementary, I found myself rephrasing the questions to make them relevant to her. In the process, we talked a lot about Margarita and her family. She has four children, including three older daughters, one who works as an accountant and two in college. She could not name the colleges her daughters attended. Her fourth child is a boy about to graduate from high school. She didn’t know the name of his high school, but she did say that he was “muy exitoso” [very successful]. Later, she showed me a prom picture of his, which said “Roosevelt High School” on it. “Oh, he goes to Roosevelt!” I said with excitement, since it was a school I’d known since my youth. Margarita seemed to frown a bit, “Cuando uno no sabe leer,” Margarita told me, “es difícil recordar el nombre de la escuela” [When one doesn’t know how to read, it’s difficult to remember the name of the school]. (Fieldnote excerpt, June 2, 2003)_

Indeed, how could Margarita know the history packed into that name—Franklin D. Roosevelt⁶—that he was the president who led the U.S. through the Depression and World War II, but who also authorized the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during the war?⁷ To an American with any sense of history, Roosevelt meant a great deal and his name would be easily remembered. For Margarita, however, there was no such

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⁶ Although “Roosevelt,” like all participant names and sites in this study, is a pseudonym, it serves as an example of the kind of impact that the actual name would have for someone familiar with U.S. history.

⁷ In addition to acknowledging the staggering number of Japanese Americans who suffered internment during World War II, it would be remiss to ignore the 10,000 plus German-Americans similarly interned (Hollian, 1998) and the more than one thousand Italian-Americans held in camps for the duration of the war (Distasi, 2001).
background knowledge to attach to the name, and no ability to read it, either. Later in the
study, when I got to know two of Margarita’s daughters, especially her eldest, Eloisa, I
learned that, within the same school district, all of her daughters had attended two high
schools each, a total of four between them, and her son had attended a different, fifth high
school altogether. Was it any wonder, then, that Margarita couldn’t keep it all straight?
Margarita told me more about herself:

    She said she’s married, owns a home, and works 7 days a week: 5 days
in a restaurant, where they’ve made fun of her for not being able to read, and
2 days cleaning homes at an office in Fremont and Los Gatos.

    Margarita said she began this course because she was sent here by a lo-
cal adult school, the Job Training Center (JTC). She had gone to the JTC to
take an English class, and they sent her away because they said she didn’t
know how to read and write in her native language. “Me dio mucho coraje”
[It made me really angry], she said. (Fieldnote excerpt, June 2, 2003)

Later, I learned that Margarita had immigrated with her family to the U.S. about 20 years
before from rural Zacatecas, a neighboring state to Carolina and Lupe’s state of
Michoacán.

Also later in the study, I met two of Margarita’s daughters, Eloisa and Diana, both
community college students who, by the end of the study, had graduated and been ac-
ccepted to separate, local CSU campuses. Both of them, especially Eloisa, regularly at-
tended the parent awards ceremonies and potluck dinners that took place around the end
of each semester. I wondered why Margarita’s other daughter, son, or husband, however,
ever attended. So I asked Margarita and Eloisa one day as we were leaving an interview,
and Eloisa gave her mother a sideways glance. It was at that point that Margarita con-
fessed that she hadn’t admitted to her remaining family members that she was attending
literacy classes. “No hasta que sepa leer bien” (Not until I read well), would she divulge
her secret, Margarita said, not to her husband, other family members, or coworkers. Ot-
wise, she said, her husband would simply tease her and say there was no point to a vieja
(old lady) trying to learn to read. In an earlier interview, Margarita could not bring herself
to tell me, through her tears, why she wouldn’t tell her coworkers that she attended lite-
rary classes; I could only speculate that she feared the mocking she’d already endured at
work could only intensify.

The secrecy that Margarita attempted to maintain enveloped much of her life and
required her frequent engagement in the telling of “white lies.” For instance, unlike the
other mamás, who would accept a ride home from me after an interview that ended after
dark, Margarita would insist upon walking home. Once she gave me an excuse, saying
that she needed to go clothes shopping at a corner store. But then, as I was driving away a
few minutes later, I passed Margarita—who didn’t drive—walking right past the com-
mercial area, which, other than a bridal shop, had no clothing store anyway. Instead,
Margarita was heading straight toward her purely residential street three blocks away.
Another such instance came when Ernestina requested an updated phone number from all
of the parents. Margarita gave Ernestina the cell phone number of her daughter Diana,
saying that the home phone had inexplicably broken. Months later, at the end of the
aforementioned interview with Margarita and Eloisa, Margarita mentioned that Ernestina
had called her home phone one night and piqued the curiosity of Margarita’s questioning husband. Because of that, Margarita divulged to me, she had made up the story about the broken phone at home. She didn’t want any more “close calls” that might tip off her husband. And for that reason, our interviews always took place at Jefferson School or in the biblioteca. Margarita repeatedly declined to meet me at her home. In short, Margarita’s current relationship with print literacy was couched in secrecy. In relation to many of her family members, she kept her aspirations to learn to read and write a secret; and similarly, in relation to her teachers, she attempted to keep secret that she harbored any such secrets. But through it all, Margarita steadfastly pursued print literacy despite this web of secrecy and inner pain. It was this steadfastness that made Margarita so compelling.

The case of Margarita Galarza and her children, however, is compelling for additional reasons. While some may look at Margarita, shake their heads, and insist that schools can do little to help children learn when their own parents cannot themselves read or write, others will note her determination to seek formal education despite a history of access denied, and see the same resolve reflected in the educational histories of her daughters. In fact, not only did the Galarza family present a fascinating account in this regard, but the reflection of Margarita’s daughters also lent a longitudinal aspect to this non-longitudinal study, a reflective look back at what it was like making one’s way through U.S. schools with parents who had newly immigrated, who did not read or write, and who, according to Eloisa, did not possess the cultural training to advocate for their children within the U.S. school system. Additionally, along with Margarita Galarza’s daughters Eloisa and Diana, both community college students who went on to four-year institutions by the end of the study, the focal mothers in this study had children who ranged from pre-school to the university level, providing an ample source of varied data from which to draw and learn.

2.4 Summary of las tres familias: The Sandovals, Machados, and Galarzas

In short, among the three focal families in the study, all hailed from rural homes in Central Mexico, though two families, the Machados and Galarzas, had immigrated when their two older children were young, so all of their children were largely schooled in the U.S., and their two youngest were born here. Only the Sandovals were recent arrivals, with less than a year in the U.S. when I met them in early 2005. The Sandoval children had been schooled entirely in Mexico until that point.

In terms of work, Lupe Machado and Margarita Galarza worked outside the home, but Carolina Sandoval was charged with the care and nutrition of her family, which included that of her married adult daughter Soledad, who herself worked outside the home. In terms of home life, both the Sandovals’ and the Machados’ living situation included extended family, and both families were evicted. The Galarza family, which owned their home, was the only focal family not subject to eviction during the course of the study. In addition, Helena Contreras (introduced below) reported that her family had been evicted from its apartment prior to the study. With respect to those evictions that took place during the study, the process had been easier for the Sandovals, as it took place during the summer and with a month’s notice. The Machados’ eviction came with only 24 hours’ notice and in the middle of the school year.
In terms of parent classes, all of the mothers had attended the basic Spanish literacy classes as well as oral English classes. Margarita attended classes before and during the entirety of the study, while Carolina and Lupe attended during the second and final year in which I observed classes, 2004-2005. They were selected for the study because, during this second year, one of focused classroom observations, their regular attendance allowed me to observe them in the classroom, and because they were also able to grant me one or more interviews to learn about their life histories.

Table 4.3 Participant Families (data from spring, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Las familias</th>
<th>Family members participating in the study</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Focal Parent</td>
<td></td>
<td>Juan Sandoval</td>
<td>Carolina’s husband</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Soledad Sandoval</td>
<td>Carolina and Juan’s daughter</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eduardo Sandoval</td>
<td>Soledad’s husband, Carolina and Juan’s son-in-law</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lucas Sandoval</td>
<td>Carolina and Juan’s son</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina Sandoval, married, age 42. Her household included her husband, four children, son-in-law, two grandchildren, Carolina’s brother-in-law (her husband’s brother) and his wife, Eva.</td>
<td>Maribel Sandoval</td>
<td>Carolina and Juan’s daughter</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Juanito Sandoval</td>
<td>Carolina and Juan’s son</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lydia Sandoval</td>
<td>Soledad and Eduardo’s daughter, Carolina and Juan’s grand-daughter</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eduardito Sandoval</td>
<td>Soledad and Eduardo’s son, Carolina and Juan’s grandson</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margarita Galarza, age 57, married with her two youngest children living at home and two oldest daughters living on their own</td>
<td>Eva Sandoval</td>
<td>Carolina’s sister-in-law, wife of Juan’s brother</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>(not a participant)</td>
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<td>Eloisa</td>
<td>Margarita and her husband’s daughter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>(not a participant)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Margarita and her husband’s daughter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>(not a participant)</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupe Machado, age 43, married with four children living at home</td>
<td>Diego Machado</td>
<td>Lupe’s husband</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Elda Machado</td>
<td>Lupe’s daughter, Diego’s stepdaughter</td>
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<td>Paloma Machado</td>
<td>Lupe’s daughter, Diego’s stepdaughter</td>
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<td>Benjamín Machado</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sophie Machado</td>
<td>Lupe and Diego’s daughter</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Oral English classes were available only during the 2004-2005 school year.
2.5 *Las otras mamás*: Rosa Anaya, Helena Contreras, Mercedes Otero, and Alma Rivera

The same criteria for participant selection applied to the other four other mothers who participated in the study—Rosa Anaya, Helena Contreras, Mercedes Otero, and Alma Rivera—but due to my own constraints, I was unable to get to know their families well during the course of the study. Three of the women, Rosa, Helena, and Alma, had regularly participated in the morning literature circles in 2003-2004, and Rosa and Helena likewise continued with the afternoon literature circle in the fall semester of 2004 and the *dinámicas sociales* that replaced it the next semester. In addition, Rosa and Helena took intermediate English classes from their inception in 2004-2005. Mercedes, on the hand, attended afternoon classes exclusively, participating in the basic Spanish literacy (as well as the *dinámica social* that preceded it) and oral English classes of 2004-2005.

**Rosa Anaya**: A woman equally capable of compelling seriousness and whole-hearted laughter, Rosa’s keen sense of purpose shone intensely through her bright green eyes. A homemaker, married, and 30 years of age, Rosa had two children at Jefferson: Kathy, age 8, a second-grader; and Ernesto, age 4, who began preschool there in the fall of 2005. Sandy brown hair pulled back in a pony tail, Rosa’s continuous participation in a variety of programs throughout the study, from morning literature circles to afternoon ones, English classes and the *Club de Lectores*, student store attendant and parent coffee attendee, made her a regular fixture at Jefferson School. In addition, Rosa frequently acted as a classroom aid when requested by her children’s teachers. In short, Rosa was an active participant at Jefferson School.

**Helena Contreras**: A charming woman with long, wavy brown hair worn over her shoulders, Helena Contreras was a frequent companion of Rosa’s and a likewise stalwart parent participant. In addition, administrators and other parents frequently cited Helena as a school leader. One example of her leadership was a petition she helped create and circulate, an appeal to the City against the granting of a liquor license to a store in the Jefferson neighborhood. The neighborhood, Helena argued as she presented the petition at a migrant parents meeting, already had several businesses with liquor licenses and didn’t need any more.

More generally, Helena served on various parent advisory panels, for the migrant parents, the District, and the Jefferson parents program. In classrooms, like Rosa, Helena was a frequent fixture at teachers’ request. She helped out with whatever her children’s teachers asked, she said, from baking cookies for the children to decorate for the holidays, to cutting shapes out of construction paper for classroom activities. Like Rosa, Helena also took advantage of a variety of parent programs: morning and afternoon literature circles, English classes, and coffees with the principal. Also like Rosa, Helena served as a volunteer at the *Club de Lectores* and the student store.

Fittingly, Helena received recognition for her many efforts: she was voted Jefferson “Parent of the Year” by fellow Jefferson parents and likewise recognized at a statewide teachers conference. A 36-year-old homemaker, Helena was married with three daughters at Jefferson: Beti, 9, a third-grader; Alicia, 7, a first-grader; and Alejandra, 4, a preschooler. Helena’s husband had insisted that he, a gardener, act as the family’s sole breadwinner, and that Helena be a stay-at-home mom. Helena agreed with him wholeheartedly, and yet, this full-time homemaker, who had once wanted to be a schoolteacher, had arguably become a full-time school volunteer. Given her husband’s insistence, how-
ever, one might be tempted to label Helena a victim of male chauvinism. But Helena did not see herself that way, nor did she view women as subservient to men. In fact, in one literature circle discussion centered on *Caperucita Roja* (Little Red Riding Hood) Helena saw *Caperucita* and Granny as heroines, adding, “Las mujeres somos valientes; podemos hacer todo lo que hacen los hombres” (Women are brave; we can do everything men can).

Table 4.4 Focal Mothers (data from academic year 2004-2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in U.S.</th>
<th>Work outside Home</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Classes and Parent Programs Attended</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carolina Sandoval</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Basic Spanish literacy and Beg. English Migrants Program</td>
<td>Soledad (23) Lucas (18) Maribel (13) Juan (9)</td>
<td>rural Michoacán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupe Machado</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Activas en la Comunidad Basic Spanish literacy and Beg. English Coffees with the Principal Club de Lectores District Parent Workshops Youth Center Workshops</td>
<td>Elda (17) Paloma (16) Benjamin (12) Sophie (5)</td>
<td>rural Michoacán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margarita Galarza</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Basic Spanish literacy and Beg. English Legal Residency Workshops</td>
<td>Eloisa (30) Daughter (26) Diana (22) Son (18)</td>
<td>rural Zacatecas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa Anaya</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Coffees with the Principal Club de Lectores District Parent Workshops Intermediate English Literature Circles Migrants Program</td>
<td>Kathy (8) Ernesto (4)</td>
<td>rural Jalisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena Contreras</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Coffees with the Principal Club de Lectores District Parent Workshops Intermediate and Advanced English Literature Circles Migrants Program Parent Foundation for Education</td>
<td>Beti (9) Alicia (7) Alejandra (4)</td>
<td>Mexico City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes Otero</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Basic Spanish literacy and Beg. English Migrants Program</td>
<td>Carrie (9) Alex (4)</td>
<td>rural Guanajuato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma Rivera</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Activas en la Comunidad Coffees with the Principal Club de Lectores District Parent Workshops Literature Circles Migrants Program</td>
<td>3 in U.S.: Cecilia (24) Carlos (19) Jorge (11)</td>
<td>urban Guanajuato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 grown children in Mexico</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mercedes Otero, 35, married and the mother of two, had a giggly, outgoing personality that perfectly complimented her jovial freckles and dancing brown eyes. Mercedes had only one child at Jefferson, Adam, age 4, a pre-school student. Mercedes’ older child, Carrie, was a 9-year-old third-grader at nearby Olympia School, a public elementary school in the same district. Mercedes was an enthusiastic participant and classroom leader in the dinámica social, which accompanied the basic Spanish literacy and oral English classes of the spring semester (January-May) of 2005. Her leadership emerged in a variety of ways. For instance, a fluid and confident reader, Mercedes was frequently asked by Ernestina to read aloud at the beginning of the dinámica, when the summary of the preceding class was read. In addition, Mercedes was a gifted participant in class discussions, one who contributed with great wit and laughter. But Mercedes had a serious side, too: after reading a newspaper article in class about the governor’s proposed cutbacks in education and health services, she was inspired to write him a letter in protest. In response to her letter, when Ernestina asked me to plan a lesson for the following week, I decided to follow Mercedes’ lead and suggested that the entire class consider writing a letter to the governor (Chapter 5).

There had been a notable interruption, however, in Mercedes’ otherwise consistent attendance, one that she lived to tell us about a few weeks later:

In today’s class, before breaking up into groups, Ernestina asked Mercedes to tell the class what happened to her after class recently. Mercedes then proceeded to tell her story. Her husband had offered to pick her up along with their daughter after class on Monday, February 14 (Valentine’s Day), but Mercedes had told him that that wouldn’t be necessary since it wasn’t that far to walk. But on their way home, Mercedes was hit by a truck. She was very careful not to walk until the light permitted, she said, but the pickup didn’t see her. She shoved her daughter out of the way, but Mercedes herself was hit and ended up in the hospital for two days. She had injured her arm, blacked out, and possibly had blood clots in her brain. She told us that she woke up in the hospital calling out for la maestra Ernestina and counting in English, which we had been learning to do in class. The whole class applauded when Mercedes reported this detail. While in the hospital, she said, she kept asking to come to class. In fact, Mercedes was let out of the hospital the following Wednesday at 4:00 p.m., just when our next class would be starting, and wanted to come straight to Jefferson, but the doctor told her to go home and rest. (Fieldnote excerpt, 3/2/2005)

Mercedes’ fervor for learning and the enthusiasm she demonstrated in class were every bit as evident outside the classroom, even as she lay injured on a hospital bed. Among the mothers in this study, Mercedes was yet another force to be reckoned with, a woman of great resilience who was not about to let a truck come between her and her education.

Alma Rivera, 48, was the only divorced mother in the study. Two of her children, Jorge (11) a Jefferson fifth-grader, and Carlos (19) a recent graduate of Roosevelt High, had been born and raised in the U.S. In addition, Alma had five adult children, age 24 and
above, who had grown up entirely in Mexico, although daughter Cecilia (24) had recently joined her in the U.S.

Despite Alma’s appearance—her diminutive five-foot stature, light brown hair, and pale, aging complexion—she possessed a commanding presence that seemed to add several inches to her height and remove several years from her expression the minute she began to talk. Perhaps, too, it was her resolute posture, or the intense gaze of her chestnut eyes—magnified by rimless glasses—that commanded one’s attention despite her small frame. But more than mere physical aspect, Alma Rivera seemed to bear conviction and clarity not only in her words and actions, but in her whole being. It was no wonder that several members of the Jefferson community, mothers and school personnel alike, independently identified her as a dynamic community leader. In fact, Alma worked outside the home for the county, counseling young mothers in their homes about the importance of breastfeeding. As such, whether volunteering in the community or working for remuneration, Alma was all about community. In fact, at the end of the 2005-2006 school year, when a huge party was held in the school cafeteria to honor Mr. Serrano, who was being transferred to another school, Alma pointed out to me by name important community leaders, including a City Council candidate, and named two other local politicians she thought might also arrive. Alma understood, then, who the movers and shakers were. That, coupled with her relentless nature made her yet another motivating force among the parents at Jefferson Elementary.

3. The Parent Coordinator and Principals

La maestra Ernestina Olmedo, Parent Coordinator: The primary resource and pillar of the Jefferson parent program was its Parent Coordinator, Ernestina Olmedo. In her mid-fifties during the study, Ernestina was an indefatigable woman with years of experience in both the community and in education, and the events of her life, in shaping her, had likewise shaped her classroom. This section sketches Ernestina’s background and its reflection in her approach to Jefferson’s parent programming and the parents themselves.

A dedicated teacher and doctoral student, Ernestina Olmedo frequently worked 12-hour days running Jefferson’s parent programs and then attended graduate courses on weekends. But if Ernestina had extensive experience on the professional front, then she did on the home front as well. She and her husband, who worked at the JTC, had raised six children together, which no doubt lent Ernestina considerable cachet with Jefferson’s parents. Indeed, in front of the classroom, despite her diminutive physical stature, Ernestina seemed larger than life, a magnet for respect. Certainly one source of the respect Ernestina garnered was that which she doled out: she revered the parents, her students—and repeatedly told them so—for their courage, resilience, humility, decency, life-knowledge, and caring for their children. Likewise, the parents, as one would expect in traditional Mexican culture, esteemed Ernestina as a teacher, yet they treasured her still more—and repeatedly told her so—for her dedication to helping them learn.

Although she measured only about 5-foot-2, Ernestina’s huge, engaging smile seemed to fill whatever classroom she stood before. That same magnanimous smile welcomed every newcomer—and there were many—who showed up at her classroom door, often to humbly ask if this was where they could learn to read. Ernestina’s short black wavy hair, professional attire, and perky nature added to her charm, but that charm was at the same time so deeply embedded in her persona, her integrity, in her reverence toward
the parents, that it was clear that her attractive appearance was a mere reflection of a much deeper, stronger character within.

Ernestina’s compelling character, in fact, had been wrought through some tough times that likely helped her empathize with the parents and their struggles. Having immigrated to the U.S. from rural Jalisco, Mexico when she was four years old and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, Ernestina frequently shared with the parents and me the vicissitudes of her own life. She recalled for the class, for instance, how, as a schoolgirl returning from summer vacation, she and her classmates were typically asked to write an essay about how they spent the summer. Ernestina could never bring herself to write the truth, she said, that her family spent the summer picking prunes and other crops, not vacationing.

In fact, it was in high school that Ernestina realized that she had been tracked into a dumbed-down curriculum: in her English classes, students did worksheets and read Reader’s Digest, while in other classes, she discovered, students read literature. Fortunately, through one of her brothers, Ernestina was exposed to literature, beginning with Cervantes’ Don Quijote de la Mancha, which she enjoyed so much that she started going to the library regularly to check out books as well as to study, since it was quieter in the library than at home. Her grades, she said, improved dramatically. Ernestina now consistently made the honor roll, and at the same time, she developed a deep love for reading and for literature.

Ernestina went on to community college, but despite her good grades and love of learning, she never felt at home there. As she explained to me in one of three taped interviews:

I went to […] [community] college it. It was a very difficult experience for me, though not academically, because for one thing, I didn’t really know what I wanted to major in. I didn’t know what options were available for me. So I majored in business, and I found that to be boring and…I didn’t enjoy the classes. It was also hard because the environment was so cold. I didn’t know anyone, I was the only one from my…high school who went there, and the teachers were not very friendly […]. It, it was a big contrast from my own home and my own community. So I dropped out of college, I remember, in December, and I went into the counselor’s office, and he said, “I don’t understand why you want to drop out […] You’re getting good grades.” And I said, “I just, I just can’t do it, I just can’t do it.” So I dropped out. And of course, I felt so bad, I felt like a failure. I felt…I didn’t…fulfill my expectations. I didn’t reach the dream that I had, you know, for my future and it was, it was a difficult time for me. I began to ask myself, well, who am I? What do I want? Where do I come from? Where am I going?

Fortunately, Ernestina’s mother recognized, at that point, that a different sort of learning experience could benefit her daughter:

I remember the day…that I left [dropped out of college]. I was in such distress. My mother saw how sad I was, and at that time, my aunt was preparing for a trip to Mexico to the village where I was born. I was 17. She said, “Well, your tía Isabel is going to Mexico. Would you like to go with her?” And I said yes […]. It was the most rewarding experience. It was the perfect thing for me at that time, because…I had kind of lost a sense of who I was in high school…I had lost my Spanish. I didn’t know a
lot about my history. I wasn’t really grounded in, in much. But when I went to Mexico, it was so uplifting; it was like my ancestors calling. I felt the strength of my ancestors, of my grandparents, of my great-grandparents. I was so welcomed and loved by my family there, that I began to see myself in a different light, and I began to appreciate the Mexican music, the Mexican culture. I came back after three months of visiting Mexico; I came back a different person. It was the medicine I needed. It was a time for soul searching…

Ernestina returned from Mexico and worked at a local bank for more than a year. She met her husband, they married when Ernestina was 21, and they raised their six children together. In raising her children, based on her own experience in school, Ernestina did not expect them to get significant exposure to literature from schooling alone. She therefore took it upon herself to educate her children at home, expose them to reading, and ultimately prepare them for college:

Out of all my classmates, I was the only one who went to college and, and it just didn’t seem fair. So when […] I was raising my own family, my own children, I decided that we were going to do a lot of reading at home. And even though they [the children] probably were not going to have a quality education at school, I was still going to enrich their lives in a different way [at home].

In fact, Ernestina took this proactive approach to literacy development not only in her family but also in her community. It was in her parish, Sagrada Familia, the same local parish that served the Jefferson neighborhood, where Ernestina began a small library in the late sixties. Obtaining permission from the church’s pastor, she was given a space in a closet of the parish hall to store books. Each Sunday after mass and with the help of her comadres, Ernestina opened up a library table to parishioners. In time, however, their book collection grew and ultimately outgrew the closet, and so they were allotted a small storage room in the parish school. Then, when the women met a college student keen on grant-writing, they expanded the book collection, attracted still more supporters, and ultimately gained the space and status for a public library, the one that eventually was moved to its present facility, the biblioteca that shares a city block with Jefferson School, the clinic, and the youth center. In short, it was Ernestina’s early initiative in the sixties that, three decades later, helped bring about a public library dedicated to Spanish materials in a beautiful, modern facility.

But at the same time that Ernestina worked to enrich her family and her community through literacy, she also sought to enrich herself through further schooling:

I loved my children and I loved taking care of them, but I needed something more. So I thought of a friend of mine at that time who was going to school, returning through a reentry program, and I joined her and went back to college. And as I said, I really had this image of myself as a failure, because I had dropped out [of college before], and I said, “I’m only going to take one or two classes. This way I’ll get a taste of what it feels like to return to school.” I did really well in those classes, and that was another boost, and that really gave me the motivation to continue my schooling.
In fact, by taking classes here and there as well as involving herself in her children’s schooling, Ernestina was ultimately able to earn a bachelor’s degree and a teaching credential:

As I raised my family, I would take a couple of classes and then I would return home and just stay with the children for a while and [later] go back [to school]. I could do that at that time […]. We could afford to live on my husband’s salary […]. He was a grocery checker […]. When my children became of school age, I decided to become involved in their schooling, and so I started as a classroom mother and volunteer and did translations. Then the principal asked me if I wanted to do formal translations for pay,…so I started getting paid for the translations that I did. Before I knew it, I was helping out in the classroom as an instructional aide and…I discovered that I liked it. I liked working with young children, and I liked working in a school setting […].

[Then] my husband was offered a position in Southern California—by this time he was working at the JTC, training students in retail, and then later moved up to counselor and outreach recruiter. He was offered a position in southern California to open up a [job training] center there, so we moved, but all this time I was taking night courses […]. [If] I was pregnant, I would stop going to school, and I would [later] go back […]. Three things, I would say, were constant: I would always go back to school, I was very active in my church and community, and I always did a lot of cultural things with my children […]. I would take them to museums, to parades, [to take advantage of] any opportunities I had to give them a new, rich experience […], experiences I never had growing up. So they were always exposed to new things [both] in the mainstream community and in our community. And we started posadas [traditional Mexican celebrations at Christmastime] at a time when no one was celebrating posadas, my comadre, my neighbor and I.

In Southern California, Ernestina completed her bachelor’s degree with the help of her children’s school district. While working at her children’s school as an instructional aide, she was accepted into a program that paid her CSU tuition and trained her as a bilingual teacher. She later earned her teaching credential at a Northern California CSU campus in 1990, having moved back to the Silicon Valley.

But if it was family literacy and parent participation that planted the seeds of Ernestina’s bachelor’s degree and teaching credential, then it was her community literacy work that inspired her to go on to earn a master’s degree and a doctorate, and ultimately establish her praxis in the ground-breaking work of Paulo Freire.

We [members of the biblioteca’s booster club] would discuss ways to interest our families and our community in the biblioteca, and because we didn’t have the number of people we expected […] using the library, we were puzzled. I wondered why, and I started questioning and asking, wondering. I reflected on my own childhood experience and how I didn’t have many books at home, and I didn’t have my parents reading to me, and I wondered if this was also the experience of other parents. And I came to realize that it was, that some of the parents that I worked with at school had never had a library experience, and yet we were expecting our children, our students, to have library experience. I was a classroom teacher, but I also did community work in the evenings and on Saturdays, and as a member of the biblioteca […]. I wrote a couple of grants, literacy grants, to see if we could get funding […] to talk to different agencies and groups about library services and the benefits that the library has for
children. I felt that I needed to know more about how to engage families in literacy and involve the community in literacy, so I went back for my masters...with a literacy focus in education. Several years passed, and I still was anxious to know more about literacy, never really being satisfied with what I knew about how people read, about how children read, about how we acquire literacy and develop it over the years. And then I learned about the [doctoral] program [...] and enrolled in it, and that’s how I got my doctorate. But I’ve always been interested [in literacy], and then I came across the work of Paulo Freire and I found, I felt, at least some satisfaction about how I could work in the community and how he worked in the community, the work that he did, the impact he had on so many families, and I thought, this is what I want to do, too.

As part of her doctoral studies, Ernestina probed the work of Freire and came to know it intimately and admire it deeply. In addition, she arranged and participated in two Freirean pedagogy workshops, each run by scholar practitioners who had worked directly with Freire. Above all, Ernestina seemed to admire what may be an essential paradox in Freire’s work—the recognition of the human condition as a sense of insatiable incompleteness, and the insistence that this condition be addressed with literacy programs that minister to the whole person. Indeed, literacy, for Ernestina, as for Freire, was an ideal vehicle to address that gap, the breach between human incompleteness and fullness, and at the same time, the breach of injustice heaped upon the underprivileged and underserved of this world. Seen in this light, literacy programs that sought only to impart particular skills would not only be ineffectual but also immoral. Herself reflecting on Freire, Ernestina noted that…

His philosophy…was meaningful to me […] He didn’t see literacy as just… coding, decoding, a language arts program. He saw literacy as a means to liberate, to liberate oneself, from poverty, from ignorance. And that’s the kind of literacy that we need in our community. Raising awareness, sharing knowledge. And so that is my focus today. I work with families and we come together, […] and we do critical reading. We don’t read a book just to understand the story or learn a new story. It goes beyond that. It’s deeper than that. It’s reflecting about what we’re reading […] The books mediate the conversation about our lives, and that’s what I’ve discovered.

One author whose works especially resonated with the parents, noted Ernestina, was Francisco Jiménez, a Santa Clara University professor who has written of his childhood experiences immigrating to the U.S. from Mexico, growing up in an impoverished migrant family, and attending U.S. schools steeped in racism and anti-immigrant sentiment.

The life of Francisco Jiménez is one that many of…our families can relate to, especially that scene in the…first chapter [of his book Cajas de cartón (2002), the Spanish language version of his book The Circuit (1997)] where he and his family raised…that barbed wire fence and crawled under [crossing into the U.S. without documentation]. A lot of families can relate to that. We read [his] stories just…two weeks ago, and one couple said, “Well I can really relate to the story because we were farm workers, and we worked at this camp, and the boss told us he no longer needed us. We had no place to go. We knew no one.” And they had to sleep—they and their children—had to sleep in the…pickup that they had. That became their home; that became where they lived, and it was painful for the mother to relate that
story because […] she and her children suffered a lot of hardship. That’s the kind of literacy that I think is meaningful, when you can talk about your [life and] unveil the injustices in our community. It is like peeling, peeling off, and [for] parents and adults… it’s like taking a blindfold off their eyes […] to reflect on your life and to…try to understand why we lived the way we lived. It’s a rich experience for me, too, to share with other families.

While the works of additional Latina and Latino authors such as Pam Muñoz Ryan and Víctor Villaseñor resonated with the parents as well, in the literature circles and basic literacy classes Ernestina also presented stories reflecting a variety of cultures. The parents read, for instance, the Spanish language version of Ken Mochizuki’s *El béisbol nos salvó*, the story of how playing baseball helped a group of Japanese Americans survive the humiliation and injustice they suffered in an internment camp during World War II. Another story, Jon Muth’s *Las tres preguntas (The Three Questions)*, shared Tolstoy’s Russian wisdom. Another story, Patricia Polacco’s *Pollo de los domingos (Chicken Sunday)*, was one of many that Ernestina selected and shared with the parents that reflected African American perspectives.

It’s […] a way for our parents to learn about other cultures […]. [In so doing] we find our commonalities, and we find our differences, and I think that we learn to appreciate each other for those…things that we share, for the differences, also [for] our uniqueness.

In fact, the broad multicultural experience that Ernestina shared with the parents through books also served as an introduction for the parents to life and culture in the U.S. It was in her classes that they gained exposure, sometimes their first exposure, to various traditions from valentine exchanges to Easter egg hunts, and to national heroes from Martin Luther King to César Chávez. As just one illustration, at Ernestina’s doctoral graduation party, held in a hall graced with a large portrait of César Chávez, my husband happened to ask one of Ernestina’s students, Adriana, a woman in her mid-fifties, if she’d heard of Chávez back in México. No, replied Adriana, he wasn’t well known there. And when he asked how she learned of Chávez, Adriana and the woman seated next to her immediately and simultaneously replied, “¡de la maestra Ernestina!”

But the importance of sharing U.S. cultures was not merely to impart some cultural knowledge upon the parents but also to minister to their humanity:

We share our humanity, and it is in that sharing that we bond, that we come together, that we realize that we are humans and we suffer, which is very compassionate […]. But the wonderful thing about these literature circles is that people walk in the door with their life experiences. We sit down and read, and we share those experiences, so that when people leave they’re not the same person who walked into the…classroom […]. You’ve been enriched by the thoughts of others. You feel supported that you were able to share, and… it takes a bit of a burden off your shoulder. And so there are a lot of benefits in…the literature circles, and that’s why they’re important for me—the benefits to the family, but also to the children, because parents are taking the books home and sharing them at home with their children […]. You have a book that is bringing a parent and a child closer together. The book merely…mediates the friendship, the relationship, the bonding between the family members. And so books
are really very powerful [...]. They’re not just recreational; they also offer opportunity for reflection, deep reflection.

Further, because Ernestina’s pedagogical approach sought to minister to the whole person, it also meant that the program she ran underwent frequent reexamination and rettooling, seeking to adapt to new needs, new situations, new students:

If you don’t make accommodations, adjustments, the programs will not work for you. Always try to meet the needs of the families with the resources that you have.

In sum, Ernestina Olmedo was not only a tireless, educated, and empathetic instructor and parent coordinator, but an undeniably reflective one as well. Her personal background and professional preparation, coupled with her years of community literacy work and her constant, deep desire to minister to the community on its own terms, were the essential tools that she applied in her mission at Jefferson School. Her attentiveness and diligence were at once ingrained and primed, extensive and flexible, earnest and intelligent. In the words of her own principal:

When I hire people, I only hire the best. Ernestina has been an awesome advocate for parents. She is very passionate about what she does, and I think that’s why we’re having success.

**El director Julio Serrano:** In fact, similar to Ernestina in his approach, background, and training, Julio Serrano was likewise an earnest and experienced administrator. From the beginning of his tenure as principal in 2002, he acknowledged the importance of parents and sought ways to reach out to them, hiring Ernestina, a classroom teacher up to that point, to coordinate parent programs. When the first program that Ernestina instituted was the Coffee with the Principal, or Café con el Director, the busy Mr. Serrano did not shy away but embraced it. In fact, as noted by parents, his smiling face and ready handshake enthusiastically greeted them each morning, as he and Ernestina stood at the entrance of the school to invite parents to the daily outdoor assembly on the blacktop and coffee on Tuesdays. Amiable and outgoing, a tall, striking man in his early forties, Julio, like Ernestina, seemed to attract parents with equal doses of charisma and earnestness.

Although he had begun as principal only in the year leading up to this study, Julio Serrano had worked at Jefferson for several years and in the District even longer. He had worked as a bilingual resource teacher there for five years and then vice principal for two before accepting the baton from his predecessor, Andy Molina. Prior to that, he had served as a second-, third-, and fourth-grade teacher at nearby Olympia School (in the same district) for ten years. One of the things that attracted him to Jefferson and motivated his transfer was its professional development program, which allowed him to earn a master’s degree and state administrative credential at a nearby CSU campus.

Although Julio Serrano had been born in El Paso, Texas, he was raised in Mexico in the border towns of Ciudad Juárez and Mexicali before moving to Watsonville as an eighth-grader. In Mexicali he had studied some English, first in after-school programs as a fifth- and sixth-grader, then as part of the regular curriculum as a seventh- and eighth-grader. But even with his background in English, Mr. Serrano recalled the transition to life in the U.S. as a difficult one. In an interview with me, he recalled feeling out of place
and cutting class a lot, until a young firebrand Chicana teacher in high school turned him around. She had been his teacher for U.S. history and government. Both sets of experiences, he said, the difficulties he’d faced in adapting to the U.S. and the excitement he felt in this teacher’s classroom, led him to seek a career in education.

But the greatest influence in Julio Serrano’s life, as he noted in a speech at his going away party held at Jefferson in June of 2006, was that of his mother:

Mr. Serrano spoke movingly about his mother. She was the hard-working single mother of four, he said, and worked in the fields her entire life. In fact, it was only in the last 5 years that he and his siblings had finally convinced her to retire. Even though she wasn’t always home from work when he got home from school, Mr. Serrano said he was inspired by her work ethic and her tenacity. This taught him optimism, he said, a theme he emphasized throughout his speech. (Fieldnote excerpt, 6/7/05)

Like Ernestina, then, Julio Serrano possessed not only work experience but also life experience that had led him down the path that ultimately brought him to his position at Jefferson School. His tenure as principal there, however, was short-lived, as another low-income school in the District, assigned by the state to be “reconstituted” or restructured as a severely underperforming school, had sought him out to implement the state’s directives and turn the school around.

The new principal, Mr. Serrano’s replacement, arrived in the final year of this study after I had completed the observation phase and was now conducting follow-up interviews. As such, I did not seek to include her in this study. Ernestina reported, however, that parent programming at Jefferson was reduced under the new leadership. The new principal, for instance, ended the Coffees with the Principal program and renamed them “Parent Coffees.” She also asked Ernestina to shift her focus from working mainly with parents to working more with children, especially those who needed extra help in reading. In addition, the city grant had run its course, so Jefferson’s programs no longer extended to parents whose children did not attend the school. Evening classes for parents were reduced, most notably oral English classes, which were cut from the program entirely. Frustrated by the changes, Ernestina followed Julio Serrano, whose philosophies more closely agreed with her own, and transferred to his school starting in the 2006-2007 school year.

Former principal Andy Molina: Another fortifying and indelible influence in the life of Jefferson School and its surrounding community had been that of its former principal, Andy Molina. Upon his retirement in 2002, Andy had served at Jefferson as principal for 9 years, had seen its enrollment double, and dramatically increased parent and community involvement before passing the baton to Julio Serrano. Mr. Molina had begun his career as a classroom teacher but became an administrator in 1974, joining the District at that time. He served as principal at a variety of elementary schools in the District and later as its Director of Bilingual Education for 6 years, before coming to Jefferson in 1993.

Born in 1937 in a small town in California’s San Joaquin Valley, Andy was the ninth of 13 siblings. His father had passed away when he was only two years old. Like Julio Serrano, Andy Molina was highly influenced by his hard-working, single mother
who maintained the household on a farmworker’s wages. Andy and his siblings joined her in the fields on weekends:

She was a very hard-working mother and made sure that we became hard-working as well. And she valued education. She worked hard and went to work every day in the fields, and we would work on the weekends. But she made sure that we […] attended school, and supported us in every way she could even though she couldn’t read or write in English or even speak very much English.

Although Andy recalls speaking only Spanish when he started school, he learned English quickly, in part, he said, through his older siblings. He did well in school and had perfect attendance, his mother made sure of it. He participated in after-school sports and enjoyed the social aspect of school as well, and this, coupled with his academic success, carried him through his community college years in the San Joaquin Valley before transferring to the Bay Area to complete his degree at a CSU campus.

Despite his rural upbringing, however, Mr. Molina was nevertheless adept at dealing with the urban gang environment that surrounded Jefferson’s campus when he first arrived in 1993. Although he encountered graffiti-covered walls, and a faculty and staff afraid to stay at school beyond 3:00 p.m., Mr. Molina knew that the neighbors who lived in the neighborhood did so 24 hours a day, so why should Jefferson shut down at 3:00 o’clock?

I called the superintendent and said, you know, what we need to do is take back the school. I said, this needs to be a community center, a type school where people are invited, expected to participate, and welcomed, so that this is their school, these are their buildings […]. We need programs here at night for the teachers and so the custodian will want [won’t be afraid] to work. I said…tell the custodians that I will be here, that they can clean and I will be here with them. And so finally they [the District] decided, OK, we’ll put somebody there. That’s why I brought in ESL classes [to Jefferson in the evenings].

In addition, Mr. Molina opened Jefferson’s doors to the local neighborhood association to hold its meetings here.

But it was a tragedy in the mid 90s, when a schoolboy fell victim to a driveby shooting in front of the school, that convinced city and district officials to listen and work to establish a youth center and the biblioteca alongside Jefferson School. Mr. Molina told city and district officials,

We’ll work with the gang elements and we’ll embrace them. We’ll welcome them here as long as they follow the rules that we establish: No gang colors, no drinking, no [drugs] […]. And so […] whenever we had an activity we’d invite them [gang members and youth] to come and participate […]. And pretty soon it [the school and local environment] started changing. We worked with the community to establish the resources and the community center here. We had the biblioteca moved over here. We had a lot of resources that were put in here, but I never forgot that our primary goal was to educate the kids.
As these efforts to take back Jefferson’s school and community increased, so did Jefferson’s enrollment, from about 325 students in the mid 90s, said Mr. Molina, to nearly 700 when he left. (This included enrollment of about 250 students at the preschool.) As the school expanded, so did its faculty, giving Mr. Molina an opportunity to hire new teachers excited about this community-oriented approach to school improvement. He also spearheaded the school’s conversion to uniforms, enlisting community groups to help pay for them. Ultimately, Mr. Molina involved more than 40 community organizations—which funded the project through monetary resources as well as on campus presence—in a variety of improvement programs at Jefferson, including youth mentoring, tutoring, and sports programs. In addition, the JTC began using Jefferson’s campus for English classes in the evenings. At the same time, yearly traditions, like the Halloween haunted house and Thanksgiving dinners, were established and enjoyed increasing parent participation, so that they were now organized and run by parents, whereas more than a decade earlier they had been initiated and run by Molina and his staff.

The whole family is connected to the school. The family is connected to the community, and so they’ve accepted our proposal and it’s been very successful and it’s been expanding. People have built on previous successes. Someone once said that we need to build on success, and nothing succeeds like success. People want to be a part of a winner.

Under Mr. Molina’s leadership, Jefferson had thus undergone a transformation. It had indeed become the community hub that he envisioned, a place of inclusivity and support, where all were welcome to participate in a winning proposition to improve their lives for their families and their community.

Table 4.5 Participant Teachers and Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Las maestras y los directores (The teachers and principals)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ernestina Olmedo, Jefferson Parent Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julio Serrano, Jefferson Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy Molina, Jefferson’s previous principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Barajas, third-grade teacher, parent program volunteer teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josefina Garza, first-grade/Kindergarten teacher, teacher to Sophie Machado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celia Luna, fourth-grade teacher, teacher to Juanito Sandoval</td>
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</tbody>
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4. Las otras maestras: Laura Barajas, Josefina Garza, and Celia Luna

The selection of teachers as study participants was made on the basis of their relation to focal children: Laura Barajas had been the third-grade teacher of Juanito Sandoval as well as a volunteer in the parent program, Josefina Garza was the first-grade teacher of Sophie Machado, and Celia Luna was the fifth-grade teacher of Juanito Sandoval.

Laura Barajas: A bilingual third-grade teacher at Jefferson for 8 years when this study began in 2003, Laura Barajas had herself attended primary school in the District before transferring to catholic schools for middle and high school. The youngest of four siblings and the only one to be born in the U.S., Laura was the first in her family to attend college, graduating from Stanford University with a degree in psychology. She was no longer the only family member, however, to hold the distinction of having attended college. Since her graduation, she
told me proudly, an older brother had had his two children earn bachelor’s degrees, and one of those children was now attending medical school.

Ms. Barajas was one of three Jefferson teachers who volunteered in parent programs there. (The other two maestra volunteers were not participants in this study, as they tended to volunteer on nights when I was unable to attend, and thus I did not observe them.) She explained her interest in parents noting,

> I wanted to be involved and I thought, that’s something that really appeals to me [...]. At that point I’d been teaching for about 5 years, and there were many parents that couldn’t read. And they’d come to conferences and they were always interested in some kind of help. You know, there were parents coming in and saying, help me fill out this job application…and feeling very embarrassed about their inability. I mean it just blows my mind that somebody could live, you know, 30 to 40 years and not know how to read.

In fact, Laura found that she spent a good deal of parent conferences simply reading to parents and interpreting for them the various forms of documentation, such as report cards and samples of their children’s work, that were part and parcel of parent conferences. She added,

> I think school is intimidating to parents. I think…it helps that […] the majority of our staff speak Spanish. The parents feel very comfortable coming in, but I think school can be very…scary. Either they don’t have good experiences with school, or they have no experience with school, or there is this, you know, “la maestra” idea of, you know, this teacher as an exalted [person], don’t bother them kind of thing. And you only come in [to the school] when it’s something bad or there is a problem and…the bottom line is it’s really intimidating for parents, especially if they can’t read. In terms of conferencing, I don’t think it’s shame, but just parents who are very humildes [poor and with little or no formal education], [they] come in and they’ll be kind of embarrassed or, or wanting forgiveness for not being able to do more or for not being able to participate more. Anyway, so Ernestina was doing this program and I was really interested in it […]. And…it was amazing.

Ms. Barajas was enticed to volunteer for Jefferson’s parent literacy programs in part due to the needs she saw in parents. Yet she was quick to point out that some of her own needs were addressed through her participation: “You know it was really amazing, it was meeting a lot of my needs.” Ms. Barajas’ father had passed away, and interacting with parents, especially older ones, she said, brought her consolation.

Josefina Garza: The teacher of a combination kindergarten/first grade class, Josefina Garza was the teacher of first-grader Sophie Machado, the youngest child of Lupe Machado.

Interestingly, Ms. Garza’s early history was not unlike that of many Jefferson students: she was born in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico, but came to the U.S. as a girl and was schooled here, attending grade school in predominantly Latino East San José before graduating from a local community college and San José State University. There, she said, she studied bilingual and bicultural education.

But Ms. Garza had embarked upon a new challenge during the final year of this study. A bilingual education teacher throughout her decade-long career, this year Ms. Garza had been assigned by the new principal, Mr. Serrano’s replacement, to teach an
SEI class, taught entirely in English. That, coupled with the first-grade/kindergarten combination, made for a challenging year:

Actually, this year was a learning experience for me because…coming from …a bilingual class…I taught the SEI class, which is English only, and…this is my first year doing that, [and] along with that I taught a combination class, which was very challenging.

These challenges, said Ms. Garza, led her to seek the aid of Ernestina Olmedo’s Club de Lectores for many of her students. Still, the year’s challenges had brought with them a variety of frustrations left unaddressed.

Celina Luna: With 15 years’ experience in bilingual instruction, Celia Luna was Juanito Sandoval’s fourth grade teacher. The daughter of a Mexican immigrant father and a San José born, migrant mother, Celia was also born in San José. However, she spent her early years and attended kindergarten in Mexico, and therefore spoke no English when she entered the first grade upon her family’s return to the Santa Clara Valley. Still, as the daughter of a bilingual mother and a father who believed in education, Celia recalled no difficulties, only family support, in adjusting to U.S. life and schooling:

My father is the oldest male in his family, and I think he, he told me growing up, “Pues [Well], you are gonna have options.” Sometimes a lot of women don’t have options. They marry young, they get stuck, have children. I think his mindset was, “You are gonna have options, and education will give you options,” because he saw how a lot of women get stuck in bad marriages or in abusive situations. And because they weren’t educated, they didn’t have options. So…that’s my understanding. And I am the oldest.

As Celia recalled, her father, a native of the state of Jalisco, had witnessed this in his own mother, abandoned by her husband and left with 7 children to raise. Although he himself had only a second-grade education, he expected his own children to graduate from college: “At my house it was expected to go to college. It…wasn’t a question of if, it was a question of when.”

One could certainly speculate that these home influences had helped pave the way for Celia’s latest endeavor—a master’s degree in educational leadership. Although it was an admirable undertaking, Ms. Luna found herself at once invigorated by the educational theories she was studying and frustrated by the federal mandates of NCLB, which didn’t allow her the classroom time to put new theories to the test:

You know…I just sat with the principal and got my evaluation: highly effective. So she [the principal] recognizes my hard work, but the emotional part of it is the frustration. I know I can do better. I know I can. Give me the time. Trust me as a professional. And it seems like that trust isn’t there. We have to follow the mandates. So that’s part of the struggle.

Also a teachers union officer, Celia was part of an effort to lobby for a longer school day that would give teachers needed classroom time and accompanying compensation. In the meantime, however, the end of the school year, as in the case of Ms. Garza (if not most teachers), found her beset with frustrations.
5. Conclusion

In sum, the focal participants of this study, seven Mexican immigrant mothers, did not step into a vacuum upon entering Jefferson Elementary’s campus. Jefferson’s roots were steeped in a long regional history of racism against Mexican origin and immigrant peoples, reflected as well in a national climate engulfed in education as a political football, in a local climate of great social and economic disparity, and in a changing school climate influenced by shifting leadership and by recent federal and state political mandates. In addition, against this complex societal backdrop, they enacted their own lives, impacted by the various societal stigmas heaped upon them—Latina immigrant females, undereducated, non-print literate, and/or undocumented. As such, the mothers lived lives fundamentally invisible within the larger Silicon Valley society that they had come to inhabit and to which they contributed.

Beyond societal labels, however, the mothers themselves brought with them their own real and varied histories: of diverse family backgrounds, varying access to education and print literacy, and varying work, health, and immigration histories. The confluence of these influences, their convergences, collisions, and amalgamations, are the subject of the coming chapters.
Chapter 5: Literacy Development: Reading the Word and Reading the World

Part of the context of my immediate world was also the language universe of my elders, expressing their beliefs, tastes, fears, and values which linked my world to a wider one whose existence I could not even suspect.

—Paulo Freire, Literacy: Reading the Word and Reading the World, Freire and Macedo (1987)

1. Introduction: Historical and Social Contexts for Individual Literacy Development

This chapter examines parents’ relations with print from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, specifically seeking to address the question, “what are parents’ ways with the printed word?” The chapter begins by delving into parents’ historical trajectories, focusing on parents’ relative or limited access to formal education and exposure to print literacy in childhood in Mexico. From there, the chapter proceeds to examine present relations to and practices with print, seeking links between past and present. At the same time, it elaborates upon the present context of parent programming at Jefferson School and the literacy development that it entails. The venues of this present context are the primary generative spaces (Kalman, 2004a following Zboray, 1993)\(^1\) for print literacy in the parents’ lives, that is, their respective homes and their Jefferson classroom. Interestingly, although parents’ reported backgrounds in formal schooling and access to print diverged widely, the study found that all focal mothers, regardless of their level of formal educational background, supported a variety of practices surrounding the development of print literacy in the home, creating a family literacy network, and engaging in lifelong learning while encouraging learning among their children. Additionally, the study found that Jefferson’s parent programs reinforced these home literacy and learning practices, and that home practices fomented school-based literacies in kind.

The influences and impositions of the broader society as a context for the uses and limits of print literacy, language, and in fact all human development, is a complex phenomenon, communally constructed and historically grounded. This influence means that learning to read is so much more than a simple skill. As elaborated by Freire and Macedo, learning to read the word involves first learning to read the world:

Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between the text and context. (1987:29)

\(^1\) The notion of Kalman’s “espacio generador” (‘generative space’) (2004a:29) may subtly differ from that of Zboray’s “literacy-generating institutions” (1993:84), with Kalman focusing on the spatial seat of literacy, e.g., the home or the school, and Zboray the institutional aspect; yet the institution encompasses its spatial setting, and vice versa.
For the mothers in this study, their contact with the printed word arose from within one context, their lives in Mexico, and then came to be circumscribed by another, their new setting in the United States within the racialized social, political, and economic context of the Silicon Valley (Chapter 4), which included the context of Jefferson School. Along the way, the mothers took with them their personal historical trajectories, constantly shaped and reshaped, in part by the lifelong learning they enacted at Jefferson in the dynamic context of their lives. In the following section, I delve into the mothers’ historical trajectories and consider present reverberations of those trajectories in terms of the college hopes that they held for their children. From there I consider the mothers’ reasons for attending classes at Jefferson and then proceed to a thorough examination of many varied literacy practices at home and at school. I conclude by considering linkages of family literacy to parent involvement, arguing that such linkages are not skills-based but knowledge-based, and therefore accessible to all parents regardless of formal educational background.

2. Historical Trajectories and Access to Schooling

For the mothers, their unique historical trajectories included differing educational backgrounds and corresponding levels of exposure to print. The mothers’ opportunities in formal schooling ranged from little or none, as in the case of Carolina Sandoval and Margarita Galarza, to completion of middle school and vocational high school for Helena Contreras (Table 5.1). In describing their opportunities for schooling in Mexico, all of the mothers spoke of growing up in large families (with 10 or more children) with few resources at their disposal. As families of limited means, tough decisions had to be made about which children would get to go to school and for how long. Financing and transportation were the most frequent determinants. Many of the mothers spoke about the difficulties their parents faced in coming up with the money to pay for mandatory school fees (cuotas) and supplies. Mercedes Otero, for instance, recalled how her father took on extra work to help pay the fees, but it still wasn’t enough:

Cuando eran [las escuelas mexicanas] en mi época, que cuando yo estaba en la, en la primaria,…es cuando yo estaba ahí, al primero, a la primera semana nos pedían útiles. O sea libretas así y viera como lloraba yo, porque mi papá no tenía para comprarnos una libreta o un lápiz o eso, todo el juego de geometría y todo. Entonces, ya le decía es que nomás nos dieron 8 días, 10 días para llevarlo, si no ya no nos van a aceptar [como estudiantes]. Entonces yo miraba que mi papá se iba a trabajar como si fuera el sábado, el domingo para poder comprarnos eso y pues, “no te pude comprar, eh nomás te traje [lo que pude]” porque nos pedían libretas de, de cuadro, libreta de dibujo, libreta de rayas, de doble raya, todo eso. Él nos, nos compraba como quien dice la mitad. No alcanzaba, no alcanzaba…Pues, de tantos que éramos, pues no, no. Y a veces nos, nos quedábamos hasta sin comer, porque de tantos que éramos no alcanzaba.
dad was working like Saturday and Sunday so that he could buy us that and, well, “I couldn’t buy it for you, and I just brought you [what I could]” because they asked for notebooks with graphing lines, a notebook for drawing, a notebook with lines and double lines, all that. He bought us, I would say, half [of what was required]. He didn’t have enough, not enough. Well, with us being so many [children], no, no. And sometimes we, we even went without eating, because there were so many of us, there just wasn’t enough to go around.

Table 5.1 The Mothers’ Schooling in Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Formal Schooling Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alma Rivera</td>
<td>6th grade (with final months of 6th grade completed in adult school), vocational courses in baking and cake decorating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina Sandoval</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena Contreras</td>
<td>9th grade, then completion of vocational high school (training in medical assistance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupe Machado</td>
<td>4th grade, then 6th grade equivalency certificate though adult school in Mexico at age 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margarita Galarza</td>
<td>1st grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes Otero</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa Anaya</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fortunately for Mercedes, other adults were there to help purchase the required school supplies. She would work to help her aunts and uncles, she said, so that they would help pitch in for supplies. And then there was her teacher: “El maestro a veces nos, nos regalaba todo.” (The teacher would sometimes give it all [the supplies] to us as a gift.) These struggles, Mercedes said, made her appreciate school and take it all the more seriously: “Nunca, nunca, nunca, ...pero nunca me quedé ni un día sin llevar la tarea” (Never, never, never, ...absolutely never did I show up even one day without my homework). Mercedes reported that she frequently shares this message with her children. But if financial hardship made schooling a great privilege for Mercedes Otero, it made schooling virtually impossible for Margarita Galarza. When Margarita recalled for me how she had been taken out of school after less than two years, she had to hold back the tears:

O, las escuelas en mi país solamente [es] que, pues allá, allá en ese tiempo cuando yo estaba pues era el rancho, verdad, cuando yo estabas en casa con mis papases, y a veces pues no te meten a la escuela porque pues tienes que ir a aprender si hallara por pagar, ¿verdad? Yo como, yo como año y medio en la escuela pero allí nos cambiámos a un rancho donde no había una escuela, ya no te mandan porque está lejos y que cómo va sola y bueno, ya no, por eso....Cuando uno es chiquillo que no te meten a la escuela...[es que] no tienen los papás el dinero para pagar, es difícil pues.

Oh, the schools in my country [it’s] just that, well, there, there in that time when I was well, it was the village, right, when I was at home with my folks, and sometimes they wouldn’t put you in school because you had to go find out if there was a way to pay for it, right? I [went] for about a year-and-a-half to school but then we moved to a village where there wasn’t a school, and then they didn’t send you anymore because
it was far away and how will you go alone and, well, that’s it, that’s why. When one is very small and they don’t put you in school, [it’s that] the parents don’t have the money to pay, it’s difficult.

Interestingly, Mercedes described her parents’ difficulty in paying for school directly referring to “mi papá” (my dad), but Margarita referred to her parents’ struggles in indirect terms such as “one” and “the parents,” and using the present tense. Perhaps Margarita’s language helped distance her from and depersonalize a past event that nearly brought her to tears to discuss. Her family’s fateful move to another village had cut Margarita off from school, and Margarita didn’t learn to read and write before leaving Mexico in her mid-thirties. In the U.S., particularly at the restaurant where she worked, Margarita told me that she had suffered humiliation because she hadn’t learned to read and write. This time, she couldn’t hold back the frustration, and ultimately the tears, as she spoke of the humiliating comments of others and her own difficulties in simply understanding the bus routes to get to her first classes.

Ali: este, y ¿por qué entonces decidió usted tomar las clases aquí [en la escuela Jefferson]?
Margarita: Yo, yo decidí tomar porque mi hija me estaba insistiendo, mi hija la grande [Eloisa]. “Madre va a la escuela,” y “va a la escuela,” y dice y “va a la escuela.” Y ya por eso.
Ali: ¿Por qué le dice que vaya a la escuela?
Margarita: Porque para que me enseñe a leer y todo, dice. Es muy difícil cuando tú no sabes, toda la gente casi te quiere humillar porque no sabes leer.
Ali: O, y ¿cómo cómo cómo hace la gente eso?
Margarita: Pues, ahí [dice la gente] “¡Ay! ¿tú no sabes leer?” y “¡Ay no!”
Ali: ¿La gente dice eso?
Margarita: Sí así le dicen, “¡Ay, ¿tú no sabes leer? Y “qué güey, qué güey”. Por eso dice mi hija “ve a leer, ve a la escuela, Mamá”. Y a veces cuando tomaba [las clases de] los martes [en otra localidad] era muy difícil porque no conocía
Ali: ¿Qué gente? este
Margarita: No conocía ni las… ni las paradas de los buses… [pausa y llora].
Ali: Ay, ay disculpe [pausa].

Ali: um, and why then did you decide to take classes here [at Jefferson School]?
Margarita: I, I decided to take classes because my daughter was insisting, my oldest daughter [Eloisa]. “Mother, go to school,” and “go to school” and, she says, “go to school.” And so that’s why.
Ali: Why did she tell you to go to school?
Margarita: So that I can learn to read and everything, she says. It’s very difficult when you don’t know, everyone practically wants to humiliate you because you don’t know how to read.
Ali: Oh, and how, how, how do people do that?
Margarita: Well, [people say], “Geez! You don’t know how to read! No way!”
Ali: People say that?
Margarita: Yes, that’s what they tell you, “Geez! You don’t know how to read!” And “What an idiot, what an idiot!” And so my daughter says, “Go and read, go to school, Mom.” And sometimes when I came [to classes] on Tuesdays [at another location] it was hard because I didn’t know
Ali: What people? um
Margarita: I didn’t even, didn’t even know [where] the bus stops [were] [pause, crying].
Ali: Oh, oh I’m sorry [pause].

For Margarita, her early exit from schooling ultimately led to an unfortunate result—frustration and humiliation—after becoming a longtime U.S. resident. In fact, the frustration of using public transportation, which required both print literacy as well as background knowledge about local geography, a “reading of the world” in Freire and Macedo’s terms, was a challenge reported by several parents in Jefferson’s basic literacy program, as it was for Margarita. But perhaps especially in the context of her restaurant job, where she had worked as a cook’s assistant for 16 years, Margarita wished that she could have had more schooling and learned to read and write:

Ali: ¿Qué es lo que hace en el restaurán?
Margarita: O pues, preparado de la comida, levanto de la cocina. Como no sé leer, verdad, pues, no más preparado de comida.

Ali: What is it that you do at the restaurant?
Margarita: Oh, well, food preparation, kitchen cleanup. Since I don’t know how to read, you know, well, just food preparation.

Margarita’s historical trajectory vis-à-vis schooling and print literacy, then, was one that had caused her pain, humiliation, and stagnation in a dead-end job. Her present situation was rooted in decisions made by her parents as they struggled with poverty in her childhood, circumstances over which Margarita had no control. With respect to her participation in her children’s schooling, Margarita’s limited access to print literacy was one feature of a constellation of literacies, or readings of her new world in the U.S., to which she possessed similarly limited access. As she and daughter Eloisa explained, these worlds included an understanding of the transportation system that could take Margarita to the various schools to which her children were bused over the years, an understanding the U.S. system of education, and, as reported by Eloisa alone, an understanding of ways of advocating for her children within the U.S. school system (Chapter 6). For Margarita, then, the issue was not simply restricted access to print literacy, but rather a broader set of obstacles in terms of reading the world and various aspects of it. Had she had access in earlier years to the type of social networking and broad literacy support she was now getting at Jefferson, school involvement could have been easier for her when her children were young. Up until Margarita’s experiences at Jefferson, the humiliation she had suffered at work and at the Job Training Center (JTC), where she got the boot from English classes because she was not print literate in Spanish, only served to drive home the point from her childhood that school was not a place with which she could identify, where she could belong, where she was welcome.

But if for longtime U.S. resident Margarita Galarza restricted access to print and schooling had produced painful consequences, for the newly arrived Carolina Sandoval there was no such stigma or personal sting, nor reverberations expressed by her children. In fact, when I happened to ask Carolina what she felt she did well, she responded:

Carolina: ¿Aquí [en los Estados Unidos]?
Ali: Aquí, allá, en cualquier momento de la vida.
Carolina: Pues es el estudio, maestra, el estudio. Saber, este estudiar para saber cómo agarrar un camión, am, ir al doctor, todo eso, para mí es bien.
Ali: Sí. ¿Cómo ha aprendido a hacer esas cosas?
Carolina: Ah, pues yo como no sé leer, yo este, yo este, caminando llego hasta [cualquier] parte porque voy yendo, este por cuan calle voy.

Carolina: Here [in the U.S.]?
Ali: Here, there, at any moment in life.
Carolina: Well, it’s learn, teacher, learn. To know, um to learn in order to know how to catch a bus, um, to go to the doctor’s office, all that, for me it’s fine.
Ali: Yes. How did you learn to do these things?
Carolina: Well, since I don’t know how to read, I well, I well, walking I get [any]where by walking, um, along whatever street I’m going.

For Carolina, who had been in the U.S. for less than one year, who did not work outside the home, and whose family provided literacy assistance where needed, learning to “read” the new world that surrounded her was not a painful experience, but rather a source of pride. She felt it was something she could do well. Carolina had had the benefit of a small but reliable family network, including her niece, who first introduced her to the area and told her of literacy classes at Jefferson; and her daughters, who escorted her around the neighborhood until she could do so on her own, and who also read correspondence that came to the house—bills and such—in English, which Maribel was studying in middle and then high school, and Soledad in adult school.

With respect to her past experiences, neither was the inaccessibility of schooling a cause of frustration or tears for Carolina, as it had been for Margarita. Carolina struck a more matter-of-fact tone when she explained:

Carolina: Mi papá y mi mamá no nos pusieron a la escuela ni a mí ni a mi hermana porque decían que estaba muy lejos y para que nosotros fuéramos solas y no nos entranon a la escuela.
Ali: ¿Tenía otros hermanos?
Carolina: Sí y ya a ellos sí les pusieron, a ellos. Yo tenía tres hermanos mayores. Ellos sí iban a la escuela.
Ali: Pero, ¿a usted y a su hermana?
Carolina: No.
Ali: ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué a unos sí y otros no?
Carolina: Pues no sé. Mi papá decía que y mi mamá decía que es que teníamos mucho que hacer, que pa’ que ayudáramos a hacer las cosas en la casa a mi mamá.

Carolina: My dad and my mom didn’t put us in school, not me or my sister, because they said it was too far and we’d have to go alone, and so they didn’t put us in school
Ali: Did you have other siblings?
Carolina: Yes, and they put them [in school], them. I had three older brothers. They, yes, they went to school.
Ali: But you and your sister?
Carolina: No.
Ali: Why? Why some yes and others no?
Carolina: Well, I don’t know. My dad said and my mom said that it’s that we had a lot to do, so we should help my mom do the household chores.
For Carolina, school was too distant for her sister and her to walk alone, so that only her older brothers were allowed to attend school. Unfortunately, this theme was repeated for Carolina later in life as well: when her sister-in-law Eva took on a childcare job and could no longer attend classes, Carolina decided it was too dangerous to walk alone in the evenings (a logical assumption since her 18-year-old son had been mugged in the neighborhood), and did not continue to regularly attend classes in the fall of 2005.

But as noted by Carolina, at least in her youth, transportation was not the only issue. In Carolina’s case, gender was also a factor in deciding which children would go to school. In some families, such as Carolina’s and Alma Rivera’s (below) it was assumed that the male children would one day have to act as breadwinners for their own families, and that print literacy could aid them more than their female siblings, who would be charged with running a household. Yet in other families, children’s age and birth order were deciding factors, not gender. Thus, the stereotypical view of Mexican culture as steeped in machismo did not play out uniformly. Several parents reported that in their families growing up, older children were expected to help raise the younger ones or to work in order to help support the family, and so the older children received less schooling. This was the case for Carolina and Rosa Anaya (below), as well as for Lupe Machado:

Lupe: Y después ya cuando este, yo ya estaba un poco más, más grande pues ya no me dejaban ir a la escuela menos porque ya había crecido más la familia y ya pues tenía más trabajo que hacer [en casa].
Ali: ¿Cuántos años tenías entonces?
Lupe: Eh yo creo tenía como nueve años en
Ali: ¿Nueve años? Entonces, ¿estabas en, en qué grado?
Lupe: eh pues es, estaba yo en tercer grado, como de cuarto grado ya ahí paré.

Lupe: And then afterward, when um, I was a little bit, a bit bigger well they didn’t let me go to school anymore because the family had grown and I had more work to do [at home].
Ali: How old were you then?
Lupe: Ah, I think I was about nine years old in
Ali: Nine years old? So what grade were you in?
Lupe: Uh, well, it’s, I was in third grade, like fourth grade and there I stopped.

Other parents at Jefferson, however, both men and women alike, reported that in their families, older siblings went to school, using the family’s resources to do so and leaving insufficient funds for the younger siblings to attend. In short, birth order, with differing results, was often of greater significance than gender in impeding access to formal schooling.

All of the mothers, in fact, with the exception of Rosa Anaya, whose parents let schooling be an option among their twelve children, spoke of difficulties in gaining access to formal education. Rosa attended school through the sixth grade and then worked at home, cleaning the house each day until her four younger siblings arrived home from

2 The same thinking, as reported by Zboray (1993), prevailed in the antebellum United States.
school, and then helping them with their homework. This virtual in-home teacher training would later serve Rosa in good stead with her own two children. Aside from Rosa, however, all of the women spoke of impediments toward obtaining education. Even Helena Contreras, who had received the most schooling of all of the women, spoke of how she had wanted to become a teacher, but because the normal school for training teachers was far from home and the vocational high school for medical assistance was nearby, Helena’s mother insisted that her daughter study to be a nurse assistant. In this case, then, as for Carolina and Margarita, distance and transportation were the principal issues. Perhaps amongst all of the mothers’ stories of limited access to formal education, however, the most heartbreaking was that of Alma Rivera. Alma recalled that when she was still a child and her father was very ill, he advised her to enjoy school while she still could, because after he passed away, it was likely that her mother would not be able to pay for her education. His warning turned out to be prophetic:

And um once he [my dad] told me, “My daughter,” he says, “you should take advantage of school,” he says, “now that I’m alive…because when I’m no longer living…who knows if your mother can continue to give you schooling,” he says, “so take advantage now.” But since I was a little girl I thought of everything as a game and I didn’t pay attention to him and, and unfortunately with time that’s how it happened. My father passed away and in a short time I wanted to keep studying and my mom said to me that she could no longer [keep me in school]. And besides, why should I study if I was going to marry and the man would support me and so she didn’t let me [study] so I said to her, “No, I have to study” and “I want to study.” I must have made her obstinate to the point that she told me, “Look,” she says, “I’m not going to give you a single cent. You’re big enough, by now you can earn it for yourself. If you want to study, look for the help. And so well what I did was I went,
I went and I got to thinking and thinking and I went knocking on doors and telling the ladies that I didn’t know anything but if they could give me work even if it was cleaning their houses and so I went knocking on doors until one lady gave me the opportunity, but before anything else I gave them, I gave them my conditions. At first well for that reason who was going to want me [laughing]? I told them, “My conditions are these that you have to let me study. Because I want to study [go to school]” and well others told me no and we need [you] full-time. “No, I want to study,” so I went along until I arrived at a person, as I always say, you have to knock on doors so that, because there’s always one that’s waiting for us. And finally one came to me, I arrived at a house, the lady opened the door for me and it even made her laugh that I was asking for work, because at that time I wasn’t growing. I was always such a shorty, a shorty.

Alma earned 5 pesos a week cleaning house and washing dishes, standing on a stool so she could reach the sink. If she didn’t do a good enough job, she was made to repeat her work and was even hit at times: “sí, hubo un poquito de violencia para que yo pudiera aprender” (yes, there was a little violence so that I could learn). Still, at least Alma was able to continue her schooling with this arrangement, which began, as best she can recall, at about 8 or 9 years old. She continued until the middle of the sixth grade. At that time, she began working as a house cleaner for her sixth grade teacher, but things went awry when the teacher had to be hospitalized, and her husband abused Alma during the period of hospitalization. Alma abruptly left the household in response, leaving the home in disarray. When the teacher returned from the hospital to an untidy home, Alma tried to explain what had happened, but her teacher didn’t believe her. Shortly thereafter, the teacher accused Alma of cheating on a test, and Alma was forced to leave school. She managed to finish the sixth grade a few years later by studying at an adult school for two months and then taking a state-administered exam, the sixth-grade equivalent of what we refer to in the U.S. as a high school general education diploma (GED).

As a young adult, Alma’s life was full of vicissitudes. She married in her late teens, but her husband threatened to kill her and took their two children. Shortly thereafter, she attempted suicide and spent several months in a sanitarium in Mexico City. Much later, her second husband abandoned her, leaving her with 5 children. Alma, however, had since studied baking and cake decorating, and she used her knowledge to support her family and pay for her children’s schooling. Daily she created baked goods at home while the children were in school, fanning out with the kids each afternoon to sell her wares. They covered so much ground, that it was hard on both her and the children—not to mention their shoes, which she couldn’t afford to keep replacing. Finally, Alma decided to immigrate to the U.S. She left her children with her mother and made her way to the San Francisco Bay Area. Here she met her third husband, and they had two children, but he turned out to be an alcoholic and ran into trouble with the law. Indeed, Alma herself was by now struggling with alcoholism. Alma says it was at this point that she turned to Catholic relief services for help, began taking classes, put an end to her alcohol addiction with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, and turned her life around.

2.1 Summary: Histories of Inaccess and Determination, Not Indifference

In sum, for most of the seven focal mothers, specifically for Alma, Helena, Lupe, Margarita, and Mercedes, their historical trajectories vis-à-vis schooling included sustained struggles to gain access to it, often amidst circumstances of great poverty. These
various histories of struggle played out in different ways. Helena, for instance, whose mother would not allow her to be a teacher and, later, whose husband insisted she be a stay-at-home mom, became, for all intents and purposes, a full-time school volunteer and parent leader par excellence. Alma, in kind, continuously applied the same determination she possessed as a nine-year-old. That is, her indomitable spirit, which led her to support herself as a child and pay for her own schooling, later aided her in providing financial, material, and educational support for her five children in Mexico. Later still, in the U.S., Alma didn’t rest on the knowledge she had gained through counseling and classes that helped her deal with personal crises; instead she shared her knowledge with community members and became a community leader in her own right. Lupe, for her part, swore that unlike her mother she would never force her children to put housework and the childrearing of younger siblings above schooling. Getting an education, she said, was her children’s number one job. Rosa also echoed this sentiment. In fact, all of the mothers saw education as a great privilege, which they insisted their children appreciate and pursue. In all cases, however, the mothers’ own restricted access to schooling made them acutely aware of its significance, and many reported they reminded their children of this regularly.

Finally, if Rosa Anaya and Carolina Sandoval had spoken of their limited access to formal education in more matter-of-fact terms, without a sense of struggle to overcome huge obstacles to get to it, both of these women nevertheless reported a scarcity of financial resources that separated them from formal schooling in childhood. Furthermore, in contrast to claims that Latin@ parents do not value education, all of the mothers expressed only regard for its importance. This high regard was reinforced through their actions, both in supporting print literacy development, as detailed below, as well as additional ways in which they enacted parent involvement in their children’s schooling (Chapter 6). In fact, in most cases, the impediments to schooling that the mothers themselves had experienced made them more dogged in the pursuit of education for their children. Along these lines, most of the mothers held strong hopes that their children would one day attend college, a topic to which I now turn.

2.2 Challenging the Old Trajectories: College Access for the Next Generation

With the exception of the Sandovals, a recently arrived family unaware of the relative accessibility of higher education in the U.S., all of the parents expressed hope that their children would one day go to college, and in the case of Margarita, great pride in her daughters, who were attending or had attended college. But just what it took to get to college—the scholastic and financial preparation required, the ins and outs of the application process, the many college options available in the U.S. and their respective advantages and disadvantages—was largely outside the cultural knowledge base of all of the mothers, with the exception of Lupe Machado, who had received specific training in that regard through a series of meetings she attended at her older daughters’ charter high school, Silicon Valley College Preparatory (SVC Prep). For example, Lupe could name the different colleges to which her daughter Elda had applied. Margarita, in contrast, could not name either of the two community colleges that two of her daughters attended or the trade college where a third daughter had completed an associate’s degree in accounting, nor could she name any of their respective college majors, even though Margarita had helped all of her daughters with college finances. Similarly, Alma Rivera, in speaking to
me about her son’s plans to attend college, did not seem to grasp the difference between a community college he had chosen to attend (though she could indeed name it) versus a trade college he had considered.

Still, many of the mothers were attempting independently to gain that training, to become literate in what was for them a new world, the world of college access in the U.S. Rosa, for example, had asked me, on behalf of a nephew whom she said was disabled and undocumented, if I knew where an undocumented youth, especially one in a wheel chair, could go to college. Likewise, Helena asked me if she could organize a group to take a tour of Stanford University, where she knew that I worked. Thus, the mothers were attempting to martial available resources, such as their social capital (their connection with me) surrounding what I’ll call “college knowledge,” a form of cultural capital, I contend, as described by Bourdieu (1977, 1979, 1984, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) relating to what it takes to prepare children for college. Indeed, for many middle class, native-born U.S. parents, the process of helping children prepare for and apply to college has become so complex and competitive that parents now frequently hire private college “counselors” to aid in the process. Is it any wonder that many mothers in this study, all new to the U.S. system of education including higher education, sought to educate themselves in this regard? But as noted, with the exception of Lupe’s training at SVC Prep, there was little formal training available to help parents help their children begin thinking about college preparation, especially while their children were still in grade school. Even so, most of the mothers, through parent classes at Jefferson and other forms of networking, had become increasingly aware of the importance of a college education in U.S. life and its potential accessibility to their children and had begun to seek out specific information on their own.

In fact, given the mothers’ histories of restrictions to education, such college hopes and efforts to gain “college knowledge” would indicate an admirable level of optimism and persistence on their part. Recall that Carolina’s husband, Juan, and adult daughter, Soledad, had described college in Mexico as primarily for the well-to-do (Chapter 4). The following fieldnote excerpt, from a morning literature circle that involved three focal mothers—Alma, Helena, and Rosa—echoes Juan and Soledad’s outlook:

Ernestina told the class the story of a single mom she had known at Jefferson. The mother couldn’t read or write, but her daughter ended up attending Stanford [University]. When Ernestina said “Stanford,” most of the twelve mothers in attendance collectively gasped out loud. The mother had said that she took her daughter to the library regularly and checked out books on tape for her daughter. The daughter learned to read quickly. Interestingly, Ernestina said, it wasn’t until high school that the daughter learned that her mother couldn’t read or write. (Fieldnote excerpt, 10/30/03)

The mothers’ collective gasp at the mention of “Stanford” principally reveals two items of note: first, that they possessed enough “college knowledge” to recognize that Stanford is a prestigious university, and second, that they believed (at least up until Ernestina recounted the entire story) that such a university was largely out of reach for someone like the child of a single, immigrant mother who could not read or write, and perhaps also out of reach for their own children.
In short, despite claims in the literature that Latin@ parents do not value education, various mothers had expressed hopes that their children would one day attend college and sought out what resources they could toward that goal. Although Carolina Sandoval had not yet joined the other mothers in this regard, it was due, not to a lack of interest but rather to an attitude of skepticism, based on her own cultural background and limited time in the U.S. Carolina, as we shall see in the next chapter, was highly focused on her children’s present— if not future—school situation. It is possible that the uncertain future that circumscribed her life as a newly arrived, undocumented immigrant, in addition to her skepticism, influenced this focus. With regard to the other mothers, more firmly established in the United States, many appeared to recognize their need for “college knowledge.” Given the preceding discussion, it should be clear that this cultural capital, so much more accessible to the U.S. middle class, even in the form of paid private counselors as intermediaries, was not similarly accessible to this study’s focal mothers; yet the mothers, in various proactive ways, wrestled to gain this cultural knowledge.

At the same time that they pursued education for their children, however, the mothers also sought it for themselves. Leaving the topic of college hopes, then, I now return to the mothers and their own education. Indeed, in discussing this theme, I have assumed that the endgame is to get youth to and through college and beyond. A parallel endeavor, however, as the title of this dissertation suggests, is the significance of the mothers’ own pursuit of lifelong learning.

3. Why Study Now? Schooling in the U.S. Context

In the United States, most of the mothers’ contact with schooling had come about through and taken place primarily at Jefferson School, where 6 of the 7 mothers in this study had at least one child enrolled. As noted above and in Chapter 4, the mother who did not, Margarita Galarza, lived near Jefferson and had been sent to Jefferson’s basic Spanish literacy class by the JTC to acquire native language literacy before seeking to acquire English. All of the mothers attended the Jefferson classes listed in Table 5.2 for two semesters or more. Also listed in Table 5.2 are other Jefferson programs, such as the Club de Lectores (Readers’ Club), as well as classes taught elsewhere, some of which took place over shorter periods. Alma Rivera and Lupe Machado, for instance, reported having attended different workshops, of 8 weeks each, at the Youth Center adjacent to Jefferson School. Many of the mothers also attended a series of four workshops in chidrearing offered by the District and held at its main office several miles from Jefferson. In a survey administered during the basic Spanish literacy class and circulated at other Jefferson parent classes and programs, the focal mothers’ general reasons for attending classes fell into three categories: (1) a desire to help their children with their schoolwork, (2) a desire to help their community, and (3) a desire to learn to read and write in Spanish and learn English. Mothers with print literacy and schooling in their backgrounds—Alma, Helena, Lupe, Mercedes, and Rosa—spoke of taking classes in order to help their children. In addition, Alma and Helena, those most often cited as school and community leaders, specifically mentioned taking classes as a form of training in order to help their community. At the same time, the mothers with very little background in formal education and print literacy, Carolina and Margarita, expressed their desire to learn to read and write as well as to learn English. These mothers, however, did not specifically cite a desire to help their children with their schoolwork. Margarita’s children, of
course, were already grown. More importantly, in Carolina’s case, all of her children, as well as her granddaughter, who attended preschool through first grade during the study, had already garnered a significant amount schooling in comparison to Carolina herself; it was therefore the children, as seen among families in Auerbach (1989), who tended to aid Carolina with print literacy tasks and not vice versa. This is a crucial point to which I will return.

Table 5.2 Classes and Programs in which Focal Mothers reported participation (all at Jefferson School unless otherwise noted)

| Alma Rivera                | Café con el Director (Coffee with the Principal) |
|                           | Club de Lectores (Readers’ Club)                 |
|                           | District workshops on childrearing               |
|                           | Literature circles                                |
|                           | Migrants Program                                  |
|                           | Various classes offered through a Catholic charitable organization |
| Carolina Sandoval         | Basic Spanish Literacy                            |
|                           | Beginning English                                 |
|                           | Migrants Program                                  |
| Helena Contreras          | Café con el Director (Coffee with the Principal) |
|                           | Club de Lectores (Readers’ Club)                  |
|                           | Computer classes at the Biblioteca (local library)|
|                           | District workshops on childrearing                |
|                           | Intermediate and Advanced English                 |
|                           | Literature Circles                                |
|                           | Migrants Program                                  |
|                           | Parent Foundation for Education (PFE)              |
| Lupe Machado              | Basic Spanish Literacy                            |
|                           | Beginning English                                 |
|                           | Café con el Director (Coffee with the Principal) |
|                           | Club de Lectores (Readers’ Club)                  |
|                           | District workshops on childrearing                |
|                           | Youth Center weekly workshops in leadership, women’s issues, state and local politics, and toxic chemicals at home and in the community |
| Margarita Galarza         | Series of classes at an adult school that aided her in becoming a legal resident |
|                           | Attempted to take English classes at an adult school, but was asked to leave because she didn’t read or write in Spanish |
|                           | Basic Spanish Literacy                            |
|                           | Beginning Oral English                           |
| Mercedes Otero            | Basic Spanish Literacy                            |
|                           | Beginning Oral English                           |
|                           | Migrants Program                                  |
| Rosa Anaya                | Café con el Director (Coffee with the Principal) |
|                           | Club de Lectores (Readers’ Club)                  |
|                           | District workshops on childrearing                |
|                           | Intermediate English                              |
|                           | Literature Circles                                |

For print literate and non-print literate mothers alike, initial encouragement to take classes and/or to engage in print literacy sometimes came directly from the children.
Margarita Galarza had been encouraged by her oldest daughter to seek schooling and learn to read and write. In a similar vein, Lupe Machado’s eldest daughter, Elda, introduced Lupe to a book by famed Chilean author Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus*, which Elda was reading at SVC Prep and which Lupe then devoured. Lupe was so taken with the book that she jumped at the chance to pursue reading classes at Jefferson when a back injury left her with time off work and time to take classes. Lupe became, in fact, a voracious reader, helped along by Ernestina Olmedo, who suggested a variety of authors whose works fascinated Lupe. Some authors, said Lupe, resonated with her immigrant experiences, including Francisco Jiménez, Victor Villaseñor, and Pam Muñoz Ryan. Other books, said Lupe, were just plain fun, even if they were for younger people. These included Spanish translations of the *Harry Potter* series, as well as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In short, it was not only parents’ wishes to aid children in school, support their community, or improve their print literacy skills and English that provided motivation to attend classes. In addition, children engaged their parents with print literacy, inviting them into a new world to read, a world further expanded through classes at Jefferson, interaction with classmates, and interaction with Ernestina Olmedo.

In essence, the mothers’ engagement with print was for many part of an ever-emerging desire to step up their interaction with these new “worlds to read,” to further understand their changing lives and themselves through a dialogic engagement with print and with each other, in a pursuit of lifelong learning. Alma Rivera, for instance, when she became determined to turn her life around, replaced her addiction to alcohol with an addiction to learning: “Entonces terminaba un curso y seguía otro y otro y otro y otro y así fue como me endrogué para seguirme estudiando” (So, I would finish one class and then I would take another and another and another and another, and in that way I drugged myself with continuous learning). Perhaps especially for Alma and Margarita, the mothers who had suffered for their education, but also for many of the women, an inner sense of their right to pursue learning as an essential component of their humanity was a driving force in their engagement with literacy (cf. Freire, 1993 [1970]; Kalman, 2004a, 2004b). “Yo tenía unas ganas inmensas de aprender” (I had an immense desire to learn), said Alma, “y yo me preguntaba que por qué no me dejaban estudiar si yo quería estudiar” (and I asked myself why didn’t they let me study if I wanted to study).

But if their inner sense ignited the fire and their children fanned the flames in this pursuit of lifelong learning, then, in contrast to the finding of Rockhill (1993), the women’s husbands likewise supported their efforts. Although Margarita had been embarrassed to admit to her husband that she was taking classes, most husbands saw it as a highly productive activity. Helena Contreras said her husband saw his wife’s classes as a component of her school involvement, and thus as a way of supporting their three daughters’ education. For Juan Sandoval, Carolina’s print literacy classes presented an opportunity to gain some education. In discussing his own brief stint with schooling, Juan was pleased that Carolina now had a chance to study:

**Juan’s educational background:** Juan emphasized that as a boy, like Carolina, he didn’t have the opportunity to go to school. But at age 13, in conjunction with his job, he was allowed to attend school, joining a first grade class with small children. He was thus the butt of constant jokes, twice as big as the other children, barely fitting in his desk. However, Juan studied for two years
and learned to read and write on a basic level, though he said he’s much stronger at reading than at writing. Perhaps that was due, in part, to the fact that he had only one pencil, and he had to make that pencil last for the entire school year. Juan said he’d like to continue studying now, but he works so much that he just doesn’t have time.

As for Carolina, Juan was delighted that she was taking classes at Jefferson and spoke very positively of her activity. Smiling, he said he told his wife, “Why stay home? You’ll just be bored.” So Carolina would prepare meals for the family ahead of time and then go to classes. Thus, even though Juan himself had no time to go to school, he didn’t resent the fact that his wife did.

(Fieldnote excerpt, 5/4/05)

For Carolina, in the U.S. less than a year, learning to read was a matter of practicality and curiosity. She wished to be able to read the bills and notices that would come to the house, to understand how the gas or water companies arrived at the figures they charged. But generally, Carolina expressed an interest in learning to “hablar a las letras” (to speak by [alphabetic] letters).

For Margarita, in contrast, in the U.S. for more than 20 years, learning to read was a moral mission, one to which she had already dedicated nearly two years when I met her, and to which she continued to apply herself for the duration of this study. Margarita’s exemplary attendance record demonstrated how driven she was to a systematic pursuit of schooling and letters, hoping to rectify the inaccess of her childhood. Ernestina, in fact, noted in an interview that Margarita wished to be able to read more than anything:

Ernestina: It’s her dream. It’s, it’s the one thing she wants most out of life, to learn how to read and write […] I’ve heard her say, “Antes que me muera, quiero aprender a leer y a escribir.” [Before I die, I want to learn to read and write.] Eso es su único deseo. [That’s her only desire.] When we’ve asked “¿Cuál es su deseo?” [What is your desire?] it’s always “Quiero aprender a leer” [I want to learn to read]. And she is reading and writing but at a very, very slow pace. She takes books home and reads them.

Ali: What kind of books is she taking home now?

Ernestina: The very, very simple books. She is not into chapter books. She’s still into pictures, picture books and, and I think she is reading at about first grade level, but she is so, she is so, she is so thrilled. She is exited that she can read. When we pair up, when we break up for work with a tutor, we ask her, “What would you like to do today?” [She responds.] “Read! I always wanted to read. Read, read, read.”

In sum, a variety of motivations—personal, familial, and community-oriented—drove the mothers to pursue print literacy. At the same time, their own historical trajectories, which frequently included impeded access to education, often forged within the mothers a tremendous desire to learn, an intense motivation that they in turn sought to instill in their children. If some mothers, most notably Carolina, approached literacy with more curiosity than fervor, then perhaps it was because they were still “trying literacy on,” so to speak, inquiring as to whether their identity could be a “literate identity” (Ferdman, 1990, 1991). But no matter the tenor of the endeavor—whether zealous or inquisitive—all of the mothers received enthusiastic support from family members, such as husbands and
children, and likewise from la maestra Ernestina. I now turn to more of the practices and relations with print in which the mothers engaged, outside as well as inside the classroom, illuminating further these relations of mutual support from family members, school officials, and from each other.

4. Literacy Practices

As described by many focal mothers and similarly observed among the families in this study, family life was constituted as a tight-knit social network (Farr, 1994; Fingeret, 1983; Guerra, 1998; Gumperz, 1982; Vásquez, Pease-Álvarez, and Shannon, 1994), which included a family literacy network that supported an array of activities surrounding print literacy, many of which were inspired by and/or reinforcing of similar activities at Jefferson School. An important feature of these network activities was that they most frequently involved multidirectional exchanges of talents, languages, and literacies.

4.1 Literacy Practices at Home and on the Go: The Mechanics of Family Literacy Networks

As reported by the mothers and observed in the homes of the study’s two focal families, a variety of print literacy practices took place in the home, which acted as a foundational generative space for the development of print literacy. In addition, with the aid of Jefferson’s parent programming, the home and school worked in tandem, each supporting and reinforcing the literacy practices of the other as complimentary generative spaces. The most notable feature of practices surrounding print in either venue was the collaborative, multidirectional effort that sustained them. Echoing Auerbach (1989), these collaborations surrounding print, echoing the “literacy events” documented by Heath (1983), did not take on the unidirectional parent-to-child character often assumed in the parent involvement literature, based on expectations of formally educated, middle class U.S. parents (cf. Edwards, 2004). Rather, in these complimentary generative spaces, a rich variety of multidirectional, indeed multilateral, collaborations and exchanges took place, each frequently highlighting the particular talents, abilities and/or literacies of its participants, establishing the family literacy network and extending the network’s reach into the school. At the same time, participants drew from home and classroom experiences as they expanded their use of literacy practices into the wider world.

4.1.1 Multidirectional Exchanges in the Family Literacy Network

Although they could not read (or could read very little) in English, the focal mothers who read in Spanish reported that they regularly read to their children. Many parents said they had been encouraged to do so by their children’s teachers when the children began pre-school. But Rosa Anaya had been charged with reading stories to her four younger siblings as a youth in Mexico, so for her, this practice had an even longer history. In fact, in the same way that Rosa had read to her younger siblings, she charged her daughter Kathy (a third-grader mid-way through the study) to read to younger brother Ernesto, age 4, in English. And Rosa reported that Kathy also helped Rosa with her English homework. Likewise, since Kathy was enrolled in a transitional bilingual education program at Jefferson, Rosa helped Kathy with her homework in Spanish. Other print literate mothers, including Helena, Lupe, and Mercedes, reported similarly patterned exchanges within their respective family literacy networks: parents helping with literacy
tasks in Spanish, children in English, and older siblings helping younger siblings in English (cf. Auerbach, 1989).

On the other hand, parents who could not read sought the assistance and collaboration of their children, increasing the children’s contact with print. In the Sandoval household, for instance, Maribel and Soledad frequently acted as “designated readers” for their mother, who would authoritatively point to one of her daughters and request readings on demand when bills, notices, or other materials in English arrived at the house, or when something needed to be written down, such as a phone number or address. Likewise, when Carolina won books in Spanish as raffle prizes in class, or when Juanito received them as gifts from me, Carolina had Maribel and Juanito read them to her. The following year, when Carolina was less frequently able to attend classes without her sister-in-law to walk home with her in the dark, Carolina said she was learning to learn to read along with granddaughter Lydia, now a first-grader. As Lydia explained to her, said Carolina, it’s just a matter of learning which letters stand for which sounds.

Similarly, Internet tasks were usually the domain of the children. Lupe, for instance, told me she didn’t know how to use the Internet, so she charged daughter Elda with doing searches for college scholarships online. Likewise, Juanito frequently performed Internet searches in the Sandoval household. During a visit to their home after Mr. Sandoval had purchased a used desktop computer for the family, he had Juanito bring up Zamora, their hometown in Mexico, to give me a virtual tour of the main plaza. Not all literacy activities, however, took on a multidirectional character. On his own, for instance, Juanito enjoyed looking up information on the California missions as he reminisced about a school trip he had taken to Mission San Juan Bautista.

In sum, as in Auerbach (1989), interaction surrounding print literacy in the home was not generally realized in a unidirectional fashion, as generally assumed in the prescriptive parent involvement literature. Rather, I found such interaction often realized as a multimodal, multilateral, and/or multidirectional activity, part of a family literacy network, generally orchestrated by an authoritative figure, mamá. The structure of participation that surrounded literacy activities was one of hybridity, often involving multiple actors and exchanges. Note, however, that differently from the assumption of complicated “parent-child role reversal[s]” (Auerbach, 1989:172), such parent-child interactions did not result in parents’ ceding authority to children; quite the contrary, parents definitively exercised their influence in requiring their children to perform literacy related tasks. I have noticed a similar phenomenon among middle class U.S. adults in seeking technology assistance from youngsters, seemingly more competent or at least more at ease with each new technology device or Internet development.

Non-print literate adults also contributed to their respective family literacy networks in important ways, as described in the social networks of Fingeret (1983). In the case of Carolina, her contributions included household management, food preparation, and childcare. As for Margarita, in addition to contributing to her family’s income and household duties, she likewise provided childcare for one of her daughter’s who had a child, and, in addition, money for books and tuition to all of her daughters.

Curiously, however, in the Sandoval and Galarza families, there appeared to be separate ways of looking at the mothers’ print literacy needs. In the recently arrived Sandoval household, the thinking and doing surrounding print literacy involved no hint of shame, embarrassment, or humiliation. That is, although Carolina would frequently seek
her daughters’ assistance with literacy tasks, from reading the mail to “reading” the new neighborhood, this did not threaten her self-esteem or place any stigma upon her.

In contrast, within the Galarza family, U.S. residents for 20 years, Margarita’s need for assistance with print had become for Eloisa a lopsided burden. Margarita’s inexperience with print had been a source of great humiliation and pain for her, especially at work (Chapter 4). At home, Margarita said she was unwilling to put up with the teasing she might take if she confessed to her husband her dream of learning to read and write. He would say that for a vieja (old woman) like her, learning to read was a waste of time, Margarita said. She thus sought to keep her studies and dreams a secret from everyone except her daughters Eloisa and Diana, both currently attending community college. But for Eloisa, the oldest child and in the U.S. since age 8, having to teach her mother what seemed like basic tasks, such as taking the bus or using the telephone (below), had seemed like a burden. Because Eloisa was the oldest and because of Margarita’s secrecy, the task of teaching her mother fell squarely on her shoulders:

Eloisa felt that if other family members knew that her mother wanted to learn to read and write, they would offer to help. Instead, only Eloisa had helped her mother learn to read the numbers on a bus so that she knew which bus to take and had taught her mother the numbers in conjunction with using the telephone. (Fieldnote excerpt, 7/12/06)

Still, while Eloisa confessed her frustrations, this study produced no evidence that such emotions resulted in the parent-child role reversals cited by Auerbach (1989). Rather, parents’ authority held sway, and children, including Eloisa, revered and respected their parents, frustrations notwithstanding.

In addition, to her credit, Eloisa must have been an excellent teacher. In Margarita’s beginning oral English class, where we frequently worked with numeracy and played games like bingo, Margarita’s command of numbers and ability to pronounce them in English as well as Spanish impressed both Ernestina and me.

4.1.2 Secrecy and Unilateral Efforts

Against Eloisa’s wishes, Margarita continued to conceal her desires to read and write. Margarita said she not tell her full family nor anyone at work that she was taking classes. She would not divulge her secret, she said, until she was a fluid reader. It should be noted that her secrecy around print literacy did not have to do with hiding the fact that she could not read and write. While this is the common form of secrecy among the non-print literate in the U.S. (Fingeret, 1983), Margarita’s family (both nuclear and extended) and co-workers were aware of her situation. Rather, what Margarita wished to hide, she said, was a presumably quixotic desire to be print literate, to identify as print literate, and to rid herself of a burden of shame and secrecy. By the time this study ended, Margarita had pursued print literacy for five years, taking classes in basic Spanish literacy as often as offered, two nights per week. While she had made progress and had gained confidence, she still had much ground to cover to get beyond simple decoding at the word level. Margarita had come to understand this and the daunting nature of the task before her, but she couldn’t help but give it her all anyway. Her class attendance was impeccable, and she was thrilled to receive books as gifts from Ernestina and me, and as raffle
prizes in class. Margarita said she always carried one of those books in her purse, so that when she had a free moment, on the bus or before her Sunday housecleaning job, she could pull out her book and read, undetected. In addition, Margarita was secretly attempting to read at work, to recognize the shorthand in food orders written by waiters and waitresses. She was beginning to distinguish, she said with pride, the symbols used to represent “tortillas” and “mole,” a Mexican sauce. Thus, for Margarita, reading outside the classroom had taken on the character of spy work, which had to be done without the knowledge of those who might tease or humiliate. Her secrecy thus came with a silver lining, encouraging unilateral efforts, to self-initiated activities surrounding print in venues beyond the home or classroom.

4.1.3 Books, Documents, and Writing Materials in the Home

If parents like Margarita and Carolina were grateful to receive books through raffles and giveaways in the parent programs—indeed, Carolina said such books were the only ones she’d ever owned—then the parents were similarly delighted to receive certificates of achievement and completion. Such certificates were routinely handed out at the end of each semester. These documents were revered as an emblem of success, and a source of gratification and pride. Many parents reported that they kept them long after the semester ended. The certificates, in fact, also provided material benefits: some adults reported using the certificates as proof to employers that they were studying English. In addition, one woman reported to Ernestina that she used her certificate, dated and signed, as proof of residency in gaining legal status.

The certificates that children received were likewise kept at home and served as a source of pride. When I visited the Sandoval home after Juanito finished the fourth and Lydia the first grade, Carolina made a special point of telling me, in front of a beaming Juanito, that he had received a certificate—a “diploma,” as Carolina referred to it—for the “Most Improved” student in the class. On another visit, it was Lydia’s diplomas that were showcased:

Lydia had recently brought home two “diplomas.” Carolina and Soledad asked Lydia to get them to show me. Lydia skipped out of the room and quickly reappeared with two certificates. One, on thick paper with a bright, multicolored design around the border, praised Lydia’s excellent behavior and academic achievement in kindergarten. The second was a certificate for perfect attendance. (Fieldnote excerpt, 12/23/05)

Returning to the topic of books, if these were less prevalent in some homes, it was not due to lack of parental interest, but rather to issues of poverty, including the often transient nature of families’ shelter situations. The result was a lack of access not only to books but also toys and other trappings of modern, typically middle class life. Soledad, for instance, recounted to me that, growing up, she had never owned a doll. Recently arrived and now employed in the U.S., she was pleased to be able to set aside five dollars to purchase a doll for Lydia. In fact, as families became more established here, such “luxuries” incrementally increased. The Sandovals, following their third move, purchased a home computer. And the Machado family, once it gained a foothold more than a year after a sudden eviction, saw its bookcase expand, from one shelf that previously adorned
the kitchen counter to a four-shelf bookcase, stuffed with a variety of books and centrally placed the living room.

If books and documents were treasured—if not always abundant—the mothers reported that writing materials were omnipresent. Lucas and Soledad Sandoval, for instance, always kept a small notebook handy in much the same way that a more affluent person might carry a cell phone or a palm pilot. They frequently used these notebooks to jot down important dates, phone numbers, and addresses. The children, at the same time, had an array of pens, pencils, crayons, and glitter pens as well as their own notebooks:

At Carolina’s request, Lydia showed me the notebook she had begun in school. Each page had a space at the top large enough to draw a picture, followed by lines for writing. Lydia had drawn many pictures and written about things she saw, including family members, household items, and things in nature such as trees and squirrels. She wrote as many as four sentences on a page and read them to me. Each entry had the structure: “I saw a…” followed by one or more items she had seen. She giggled at her drawing of a squirrel, but it was actually quite detailed, especially for a five-year-old. Carolina said that the teacher had provided Lydia with a small children’s desk for her to use at home. At one point in our conversation, when Carolina wished to talk to me alone, she directed Lydia to go write in her book, much the same way a mother might order her child to go outside and play. (Fieldnote excerpt, 12/23/05)

Younger brother Eduardito, three years old and not yet in preschool, showed me his letter to Santa Claus, which read, “Para mi un bici,” or in conventional Spanish, “Para mí, una bici” (For me, a bike), accompanied by a drawing recognizable as a bicycle. These were notable activities, as drawing is an important precursor and accompaniment to early writing (Clay 1975; Dyson, 1989, 1993, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

Like the Sandoval grandchildren, kindergartner Sophie Machado also had an affinity for drawing and writing at home. During a Christmas visit,

Sophie retrieved a book out of a back room, laid it on the floor in the middle of the living room, placed a piece of paper on top of it, and cozily set herself down on the carpet and began to draw. Later in the evening as I was leaving, Sophie handed me an envelope that she had decorated with a rain cloud, sun, and butterfly, as well as her first and last name. She said the contents were for me. I opened the envelope, and inside was the picture she had drawn. I complimented her on her fine drawing, which included three people; she said that these were her two older sisters and brother. Sophie had drawn them alongside their home, graced with two trees, a bright sun, clouds and another butterfly dangling overhead. (Fieldnote excerpt, 12/19/05)

In short, although family finances did not always provide for many of the trappings of a middle class lifestyle, including a collection of books, drawing and writing was a literate activity supported among children in the homes that I visited.
4.1.4 Additional Literacy Support at Home

In addition to providing their children with books and writing materials, and in the case of the Sandovals, Internet access and a desktop computer, the families in this study supported literacy activities in other ways. Lupe Machado, for instance, was inspired to knit a family quilt, based on what she had read in a book Ernestina had lent her:

Lupe talked about another of her hobbies besides reading—knitting. Right now she said she’s knitting a blanket with her family. Each family member will knit a portion of the blanket as a project they can do together. She was inspired to do this by reading Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Esperanza renace*, and she recounted to me the part of the book where the grandmother took one of her gray hairs that had fallen and added it to the blanket she was knitting as a way to put a bit of herself into the blanket. (Fieldnote excerpt, 6/1/05)

The Machado family also proudly displayed some of their children’s art and schoolwork. Paloma created a vividly impressive still life mural in colored chalk (she studied art and drawing in high school) that graced the kitchen nook. And Sophie’s poster depicting her career aspirations hung in the living room:

Sophie had written on her poster: “My name is Sophie Machado. I am in the first grade at Jefferson School. When I grow up I want to be a nurse.” Sophie had drawn a hospital building, her mother, aunt, and her aunt’s new baby (now born but not yet born at the time of the drawing). Sophie said she liked babies and that was why she wanted to be a nurse. (Fieldnote excerpt, 7/12/06)

Further literacy-related activities at home likewise supported school activities. When Kathy Anaya was anxious to compete in Jefferson’s annual book reading contest, Rosa did all she could to help Kathy access a sufficient number of books to read. During the contest, for each book a child read, a loop was created out of a paper strip, and the loops were strung together to form a chain. Then each child’s chain was joined with those of his or her classmates to form a chain for the entire class, to be compared with the final chains of each class at a school assembly. The class with the most books read (and longest chain of loops) would win the contest and be honored along with the girl and boy who each read the most books. Helena, Rosa and several other mothers cut over 4,000 strips of paper to support the contest. As for Kathy’s efforts and those of her classmates,

Rosa said that Kathy’s third-grade class won for reading the most books. In fact, Rosa said there were three girls in the class who had read over 100 books each. In Kathy’s case, on the Sunday afternoon before the contest deadline, Kathy had read nearly every book in the house as well as those checked out from the library. She read both in English and in Spanish, but unfortunately, by Sunday afternoon, the only books left were the longest ones, so that Kathy spent the entire afternoon reading. It turned out that the girl who won the contest had read 127 books, Kathy read 118, and a third girl in the class also read over 100. Between the three girls, then, they’d read nearly 350
books. The rest of the class had probably read another 300 books combined, said Rosa, who noted that although Kathy didn’t win herself, she was instrumental to her class’s overall win, an important detail that Rosa said she emphasized to Kathy. (Fieldnote Excerpt, 12/6/04)

In short, home literacy practices also included support of school literacies in the home. Further, as we shall see in the following section, the local library served as a frequent link between the home and school.

4.1.5 Family Library Use

This study found ample evidence to show that, whether to support reading competitions, participate in summer book clubs, use the Internet, or pick up a how-to book or a book for pleasure, the local biblioteca was a regular part of life for families in the study, supported through the efforts of Ernestina Olmedo and the biblioteca staff, who held visits and tours on a recurring basis.

Some mothers, including Rosa Anaya, reported that they took their children to the library weekly. Another such mother was Julia Sierra. A janitor for a national department store chain, Julia’s work schedule permitted her to attend parent classes only on Wednesdays (and thus she was not a focal participant for this study). Later, when her father underwent surgery, Julia could no longer attend class at all. Still, in the summertime, she brought her children to the library every Wednesday, her day off:

I bumped into Julia at the biblioteca and stopped to chat. She was with her six-year-old daughter, Yolanda, and her two-year-old son, both of whom were cheerful and lively, yet well behaved. Our conversation turned to plans for the fall: Julia asked me if parent classes would be offered again, as she hoped to attend, and I said yes. Yolanda would be starting first grade. When Julia introduced me to Yolanda as ‘la maestra,’ Yolanda quickly got a piece of library scratch paper (she knew right where to find it) and wrote down her name (first and last) for me. She brought me the slip of paper, wearing a huge smile, and I thanked her and complimented her to her mother. (Fieldnote excerpt, 6/27/05)

Like Julia, Maribel and Juanito Sandoval regularly visited the library during the summer. Juanito belonged to the summer book club:

Juanito, who’ll be starting the fourth grade this fall, says he gets a new batch of books from the library every week. With one year of schooling in the U.S., he mainly checks out books in Spanish. Many are picture books, but recently he checked out a lengthy comic-style book about the adventures of a baby in diapers that looked quite entertaining. He also showed me the gameboard-style pamphlet that the library uses to promote its summer book club. Juanito was very excited to read a lot and be able to win prizes. (Fieldnote excerpt, 7/7/05)
But if library use was easy and natural for parents like Rosa and Julia, as well as for children like Kathy and Juanito, for the two focal mothers in this study who were beginning readers and writers, Carolina and Margarita, library use involved a maiz of activities that were completely foreign to them, even though their children regularly used the library. First of all, obtaining a library card required some form of identification, which neither of the women had. As such, with their permission, I created and laminated I.D. cards for them:

_I took digital photos of and made I.D. cards for Carolina and Margarita with their consent. I included their name and address. I thought they might be skeptical of this, but when I gave Carolina and Margarita their cards, they beamed with pride and thanked me profusely._ (Fieldnote excerpt, 8/24/05)

Once we had a form of identification, there was an application to fill out:

_When we completed the library card application forms together, I discovered that Margarita and Carolina didn’t know their phone numbers by heart. Instead, they kept such information as their address and phone written down on a small piece of paper in their wallets. They also didn’t know what year they were born; but they knew how old they were, so I did the math to help them figure out what year they were born, which was required on the form._ (Fieldnote excerpt, 8/24/05)

With the help of a kindly librarian, we then found a section with books that the two women might enjoy, and selected a few books by Alma Flor Ada. Next, I stood on line with the women (we first had to ask where to go) to get their library cards processed. Once they had their books selected and their library card in hand, the _pièce de résistance_ was checking out the books at the _biblioteca_’s ultramodern self-checkout machines. These machines were tricky even for me, despite my comparable experience with electronic machines like automated tellers and computers, which Carolina and Margarita did not have. These women bore out Ernestina’s concern about parents’ library experiences (Chapter 4). For Carolina and Margarita, using the library had to be accompanied by a heavy dose of guidance and assistance.

4.1.6 Difficulties with Telephone Use

Even though print literacy received avid support in the home, some adults, especially novice readers and writers like Carolina and Margarita, experienced difficulties with tasks that many U.S. adults take for granted. For instance, just as the two women had required assistance in order to obtain a library card and check out books, they also experienced difficulty using the telephone. Rolling her eyes a bit, Eloisa recalled how she had had to teach her mother to do the most seemingly simple tasks, like using the telephone. Carolina, too, was inexperienced with phone use, and had others dial for her. Interestingly, while Carolina said that she chatted regularly with relatives in Mexico on the phone, basic phone protocol with less familiar acquaintances was a more daunting task. For example, once when she had wanted to call me, she had Lucas do the dialing, but when he handed her the phone to leave a message, all she could say was “¡Maestra!” and
then hang up. As she told me later, she simply didn't know what one says when one leaves a phone message. No wonder that when Maribel was beaten up at school (Chapter 4), it was her sister Soledad, and not her mother, who called to notify the school. Carolina had been extremely concerned about the incident, as would any mother, but she simply would not have known how to discuss the incident with strangers over the phone. In person, Carolina was shy, true, but not at a loss for words. She was charming when meeting and greeting, and concerned and interested when listening to others. But over the telephone, Carolina did not know how to convey the social appropriateness that came so naturally to her in person.

If I appear to belabor this point, it is with good reason, as teachers frequently reported that one of their main modes of outreach to parents is the telephone. Some teachers in fact complained of frustrations with getting little or no response for their efforts to communicate with parents by phone (Chapter 7). While telephone communication may be ideal for many parents—it was a frequent medium to send out reminders to parents about upcoming classes—it may not be the best method for all parents, and certainly not if one expects all parents to provide a response by phone.

4.1.7 Summary: The Home as a Generative Space for Development of Print Literacy

In sum, no matter parents’ level of access to print literacy, the home served as a generative space, a supportive hub for print literacy development within the family literacy network. In cases where parents or younger siblings needed assistance in learning to read either the word or world, children received additional contact with print and further opportunities for literacy development, usually within multidirectional or hybrid participation structures, and often involving exchange. In effect, for the children, this amounted to receiving on-the-job training as teachers themselves. Further, there was evidence that literacy practices emanated from the home to other venues, such as the city bus, the workplace, and the local library, as well as to the classroom itself.

4.2 Inside the Classroom: Social Interaction and Literacy Exchange

Just as the families in this study naturally incorporated mutual support and encouragement of literacy development in the home, Jefferson School likewise supported parents’ literacy development. Jefferson provided a generative space in which social support, mutual respect, and respite from life’s trials were pursued through interaction with print literacy and with each other. Social interaction surrounding literacy was the foundation of this generative space: from the reading of announcements of community activities, to the verbal give-and-take of the dinámica social (Chapter 4), to taking turns reading aloud, and then sharing some more during class and at break time. Yet the open nature of Ernestina Olmedo’s classrooms also meant that not sharing was also acceptable. One day, Lupe showed up with Víctor Villaseñor’s Lluvia de oro under her arm. She was so enamored with the book that when it came time for group work, Lupe didn’t join a group but instead excused herself and sat in the back of the room to simply read. She just couldn’t put the book down. The parents’ classroom, then, was a place where, even amidst vigorous social interaction, the choice of a given parent to interact solely with her book was welcomed in kind.
4.2.1 Exchanging Literacies Amongst Adults

Within the classroom, social interaction was the most common relation surrounding print. Occasionally, for instance, there were forms to fill out and surveys to complete in class. The data gathered were used for recordkeeping and sometimes presented to the District and City Council as a way to verify participation in the various parent programs. At one Coffee with the Principal, Ernestina asked the group to fill out such a survey and passed it out to the mothers. Beatriz, an extremely active mother in the morning programs, both Coffees and Literature Circles, asked if she needed to fill out another survey, since she’d done so the previous year. Ernestina said yes, but still Beatriz didn’t start to fill in the survey. Lupe, however, was seated next to Beatriz. The two had become fast friends since Lupe’s back injury had freed her up to attend the Principal’s Coffees. So, Lupe simply took a pencil and started asking Beatriz the questions listed, filling out the form for her. Lupe didn’t ask Beatriz if she wanted help; she knew Beatriz was not print literate. It should be noted that Lupe did not view Beatriz as “handicapped” in some way by a “lack” of print literacy. Rather, Lupe had frequently expressed to me her great admiration of Beatriz as an astute woman tremendously aware of doings at Jefferson School and in the community. In fact, it was Beatriz, along with Alma Rivera, who introduced Lupe to the community booster group Activas. It was simply natural for the two women to share their knowledge and network (cf. Fingeret, 1983), as was done in the family as well. Note also that, as in Ernestina’s classes, no stigma was attached to utilizing assistance with print literacy tasks at Coffees with the Principal. As detailed by Kalman (1999), for those with less exposure to schooling and print literacy, it is common practice in Mexico and other countries to seek commercial assistance with the drafting of documents, in the same way that in the U.S. we seek assistance from lawyers, real estate agents, or tax accountants in preparing specific documents (cf. Valdés, 1999). The practice of collaborative literacy engagement was similarly prevalent in the parent classes directed by Ernestina Olmedo. Unlike in Kalman’s (1999) study, however, the exchanges that took place were not commercially based; instead of monetary remuneration, within Jefferson’s programs it was information, bodies of knowledge, and literacies that were exchanged amongst collaborators. Beatriz, for instance, had encouraged Lupe’s involvement in the community group Activas and helped her gain a foothold in that group.

Such collaboration was the norm of classroom practice. One class activity, in which some of my Stanford students (beginning Spanish learners) allowed me to bring their original fairy tales to Jefferson parents, serves as a case in point. Delfina, a fluid reader and writer, read one of my student’s stories to Margarita, and the two together composed a response note. This was another interaction in which a more skilled reader and writer provided considerable assistance to a less skilled peer, but again, with no stigma attached. Delfina took charge of the tools of the interaction, holding the document in her hand and reading the entire story to Margarita. When they composed a note in response, Delfina likewise held the pencil in her hand and paper in front of her. What is important to note is that regardless of who controlled the tools of the interaction, both women dialogued about and collaborated over their ideas, both in terms of their reactions to the story and their composition of a written response. This is precisely Kalman’s point as she writes of the commercial use of scribes in Mexico City’s Plaza de Santo Domingo: “Even those

3 Kalman (1999) specifically cites Peru and Iran.
clients who would be considered illiterate by most standards make important contributions to their texts and supervise what the scribes write” (1999:13). In a similar vein, Margarita collaborated and contributed to the production of ideas in reacting and verbally interacting around a piece writing and to an unknown author (my Spanish student). Even though she did not possess, at that point in her literacy development, sufficient ability with the physical tools of the interaction to be able to efficiently utilize them, she possessed the literate ability to understand, react, interact, and respond within a multidirectional, multilateral, hybrid participation structure. Respect for such abilities, as well as such forms of exchange and participation, was the norm in Ernestina Olmedo’s parent programs; unlike in Klassen and Burnaby (1993), parents of all levels of print literacy participated without fear of stigma or ridicule.

4.2.2 Exchanging Literacies with Volunteers

Such interaction, collaboration, and exchanging of literacies, however, involved more than just parents. Frequently, volunteers who came to “help,” including myself as a researcher and participant-observer, actually received a good deal of help with our Spanish. One such volunteer was Ellen, herself a Spanish learner:

Ellen read a history book out loud to Mercedes in Spanish, as Mercedes helped Ellen read and pronounce the more challenging vocabulary that frequently tripped Ellen up. (Fieldnote excerpt, 5/4/05)

But it was not only our Spanish that improved. In my own case, working with these accomplished adults who faced life’s gravest vicissitudes with fortitude and resolve in turn buoyed me through my own tough times. While it was beyond the scope of this study to examine the psychological benefits to program volunteers, mostly college students, as they interacted with Jefferson’s parents, it is fair to speculate that interaction with adults of such perseverance may have likewise inspired or raised the spirits of other volunteers as well.

4.2.3 Bringing Children to Class: Literacy Exchanges Among Parents and Children

Although childcare for younger children was available in conjunction with most programs, it was still common for some mothers to bring their children of all ages to class. During morning literature circles when older children were in school and no childcare was offered for tots, mothers regularly brought their small children along and let them play quietly with toys and books in a corner of the room set up for children. As for afternoon classes, the District provided childcare dedicated to child “enrichment” and not merely babysitting. Still, Lupe, Carolina, and other women frequently brought their children to class, especially older children from about age 9 and up, and a grandmother in the class frequently brought grandchildren as well. Lupe brought all of her children to class at one time or another, and Carolina brought all of her children, except Lucas. During Spanish literacy classes, the children joined in reading aloud and listening to stories along with their parents; while during beginning English class, children frequently helped the class, able to model appropriate phrases for the parents to imitate and repeat. Learning through literacy and learning English were activities that the families took on together,
whether at home or at school. The situation of Anita, a non-focal participant whose work schedule allowed her only intermittent attendance, was a case in point.

Anita’s help from her daughter: Anita’s nine-year-old daughter helped her read the English words to the José Feliciano song “Feliz Navidad.” Her daughter pointed to words and pronounced them for her mother, and sometimes giggled at her mother if she didn’t pronounce things quite right. Anita laughed along with her daughter. (Fieldnote excerpt, 12/13/04)

In a survey I helped her fill out two days later, Anita expressed satisfaction with her daughter’s progress. In fact, some of the younger children (ages 9-11) who attended English classes seemed to relish the role of teaching their parents and grandparents as well as contributing to class activities and discussions. As in the case of classroom volunteers however, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to concretely define children’s attitudes about their participation in classes for adults, especially since they were not regular participants in the classes I observed. But judging by the active participation of most children who attended, it is natural to speculate that they enjoyed working alongside adults and positioning themselves, from an academic standpoint, in the position of knowledgeable classroom participants.

4.2.4 Literate Identities: Orientations and Reorientations

As described in Chapter 2, engagement in literacy practices involves literate identities (Ferdman 1990, 1991), which, in adult literacy development, may shift as new practices emerge in changing social contexts, sometimes challenging entrenched social contexts (Kalman, 2004a, 2004b) or, as Bakhtin (1978) refers to them, authoritative discourses (Kalman 2004b). In parent classes at Jefferson School, varying literate identities, orientations toward print, and ways of engagement surrounding print emerged, were shaped and reshaped. Among study participants, Margarita, whom I was able to observe the longest, showed signs recasting her self-view as an increasingly legitimate peripheral participant (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Others, most notably parents who already possessed a good deal of print literacy, entered the classroom as pre-ordained legitimate peripheral participants, though perhaps not in every aspect, with writing presenting varying levels of difficulty for some parents.

As part of the process of orientation and reorientation toward print, parents took on a variety of classroom roles. Some acted consistently as vocal classroom leaders, while others participated as interested if reticent collaborators. Some vocally identified themselves as neophytes and sought assistance with given tasks; others, more experienced at given tasks, offered assistance. Still others at times verbalized frustrations. Rosa Anaya loved to read yet sometimes complained that she was not a writer and couldn’t bring herself to write. In fact, production of print, generally speaking, in contrast to other print literacy practices, presented the greatest challenge to parents. But for some, like Margarita, frustration gradually and ever more consistently gave way to great hope and increased confidence, to muchas ganas—a fervent desire—to read and write, and to increasing legitimacy as a classroom participant. I now consider the role of classroom leaders in the production of print-related activities, as well as a general look at roles and relations to print, before returning to a discussion about Margarita’s increasing confidence.
4.2.4.1 Leadership in the Classroom

Some of those who acted as vocal leaders in the classroom, such as Alma Rivera and Helena Contreras, had frequently been cited as school and community leaders overall. Ernestina frequently sought out both women as small group facilitators in class discussions of children’s literature, and the women gladly obliged. In addition, both women frequently made announcements about doings in the community and were contributors during whole class discussions. A case in point occurred at a Coffee with the Principal, when Alma passed out brochures in Spanish and English that explained the link between diabetes and calcium deficiency. In a similar vein, as a District and Migrant Program parent representative, Helena kept us abreast of doings both at the District level and in the Migrant Program. In addition, the women frequently used print materials, such as flyers and brochures, as a tool incorporated into their announcements and other demonstrations of leadership. Recall, for instance, Helena’s use of a petition for parents to sign to prevent the granting of another liquor license in the Jefferson community (Chapter 4).

As for their classroom participation, both women were vocal, inspiring, insightful, and astute decoders of the world and of life, and perceptive interpreters of literature as well. Regarding one story, which culminated in a banquet, Alma vocalized her insights as follows:

**Como el Día de Acción de Gracias** (Like Thanksgiving): Ernestina: asked about the meal at the end of the story. Alma said, “Es como una acción de gracias” (It’s like a Thanksgiving).

>“En las reuniones importantes, se comparten muchos valores y emociones importantes, como la bondad, el arrepentimiento, o sea el perdón, la felicidad, la ayuda, la comida, el gusto...es un conjunto de sentimientos que se expresan y se comparten.”

(At important gatherings, many values and important emotions are shared, like generosity, regret, or rather forgiveness, happiness, help, food, pleasure…it’s an ensemble of many feelings that are expressed and shared.)

(Fieldnote excerpt, 11/13/2003)

Helena, likewise had a good deal of wisdom to share during class discussions and wasn’t shy about speaking out, reading aloud, or sharing her personal history. As noted in the following fieldnote excerpt, Helena pulled no punches in her response to a passage from *Esperanza Renace*, a youth-oriented, historical novel about a young girl’s escape with her mother from the treacheries of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and of the challenges they faced with their subsequent immigration to the U.S.:

**On crossing the U.S. border in the trunk of a car:** Towards the end of the hour, when we were reading the book *Esperanza renace*, we were at a point where Esperanza, her mother, and the family’s former maid were being transported in a carriage, back in the days before automobiles were prevalent. They were riding in a carriage escaping from Esperanza’s evil uncle. They
were actually in a compartment, in the belly of the carriage, with a whole crop of guayabas piled on top of this compartment where they were hiding. The ranch hand and his son were driving the cart and wouldn’t be noticed, because they were just two men transporting a guayaba crop. After we finished the reading, I asked the mothers, "Did I understand this right? Were the women having a conversation while riding in this bumpy wagon compartment?" Almost immediately Helena talked about how she came across the border in the trunk of a car, and, yes, she felt every bump. Two other women shared that they had simply walked across the border. But Helena spoke in detail about her own experience, and she immediately related to these characters’ escaping in this hidden fashion, the same way she had crossed the border in a trunk. Within our group, at least, Helena felt at ease talking about the details of her crossing. (Fieldnote excerpt, 11/8/2004)

This fieldnote excerpt is remarkable on several levels. In terms of literacy, Helena’s ease and frankness in describing her unpermitted border crossing points to the aforementioned generative space—a place of comfort, safety, and honesty—created for literacy development at Jefferson School. Literacy development, in its fullest sense, goes hand in hand with personal development (Freire, 1993 [1970]). Helena identified with characters in the novel, and in the context of our group discussion, a generative space, she was comfortable in speaking forthrightly about a key event in her life story (Ivanic, 1998; Linde, 1993), a cathartic and self-affirming process. This was common in parent classes at Jefferson. In addition, Helena’s story reveals the humble beginning—an unauthorized border crossing—of a woman who went on to become a recognized school and community leader. As such, the generative space of the classroom provided an outlet in which Helena’s boldness, both in crossing the border in a trunk and in openly sharing her experience, reconfirmed her identity as a leader.

But leadership was not only confirmed in the classroom among women like Alma and Helena, already well known as school and community leaders. It likewise emerged through parents’ verbal and written expression, interaction with texts, and interaction with the world. One such case was initiated by Mercedes Otero, who had only a preschooler at Jefferson and whose school-aged daughter actually attended another school in the District. Mercedes read aloud beautifully, and frequently Ernestina requested that she read the summaries of previous classes aloud. But Mercedes also provided leadership of much greater substance, when, in response to an article we had read in class detailing Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s cutbacks to education, she wrote an open letter to the governor, which began with a headline, much like what she had read in the newspaper:

Protestan en contra del Gobernador
6 de marzo de 2005

La gente se siente humillada y defraudada ante todos los recortes que están pasando. No importa el color, la religión o raza: hispano, blanco, afroamericano o chino. Alguien podría entender a todas las comunidades si nos uníramos todos, porque todos nos sentimos humillados. Siendo todos iguales ante las comunidades, a todos nos está afectando la economía como seres
humanos y afecta a los más pequeños e inocentes niños que no tienen la culpa de nada. Son tan sensibles a esto que ellos todavía no tienen sentido por la vida. Acaso Arnold Schwarzenegger comprende esto claro: que no a él solo le importa el puesto que ahora él ocupa como gobernador de California. El debe de ver el futuro del mañana.

Protest against the Governor
March 6, 2005

The people feel humiliated and cheated in light of all the cutbacks going on. Race, religion, and color do not matter: Hispanic, white, African-American or Asian. Someone could understand all of our communities if we all united together, because all of us feel humiliation. We are all the same before our communities, [in that] all are affected by the economy as human beings, and it affects [still more] the littlest ones and the innocent children, who aren’t to blame for any of it. Yet they are so sensitive to this [in] that they are still making sense of life. Perhaps Arnold Schwarzenegger understands this very clearly: that it is not important only to him that he is governor of California. He must see the future of tomorrow. (Translation mine.)

When Mercedes spontaneously produced this letter, I asked the rest of the class if they would like to follow suit. To help give Ernestina some much deserved respite, I taught class from time to time, and I asked Mercedes if we could use her letter to provide a focal point for our next lesson. She enthusiastically agreed, as did the whole class, especially when I explained that, in the United States, it was common for people to write letters of complaint to elected officials. I further explained that they could sign the letters anonymously, for instance, as “A concerned parent” or “A mom.” The next week, the class—some parents working singly and most working in pairs—produced 10 letters, which I edited, translated into English, and sent to the governor. Below are more examples of letters the parents produced.4 Interestingly, collaboration in this activity was especially prevalent, increasing legitimate peripheral participation, and not a single complaint of writer’s block was heard. I attributed this lack of complaint to the relevance and timeliness of the assignment, as many of the parents had just read about and also participated in political protests to the governor’s proposed cutbacks, and most, if not all of the parents, felt the cutbacks could hurt them or their children.

Most letters were written in a confident tone, pointed and brief, yet wise:

4 Despite providing my return address, we did not receive any response from the governor or his office.
Señor Arnold Schwarzenegger,

No haga estas cosas con las familias, que todos somos pobres. Hay que tener compasión de todos los estudiantes, maestros y enfermeras.

No es posible que haga esto con las personas del MediCal.

Sería mejor que hubiera más trabajo.

Atte.,

Una madre

Mr. Arnold Schwarzenegger,

Do not do these things to families, as we are all poor. One must have compassion for the students, teachers, and nurses.

It is not right to do this to people on MediCal.

It would be better if there were more jobs.

Sincerely,

A mother

Estimado gobernador Schwarzenegger,

¿Por qué no está cumpliendo con la gente que lo apoyó en su campaña? ¿Por qué está haciendo tantos recortes de MediCal y escuelas? Apoye a nuestros estudiantes, por de ellos depende el futuro. Esperamos que recapacite sus decisiones.

Atentamente,

Una mamá

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger,

Why aren’t you fulfilling your promises to the people who supported you in your campaign? Why are you making so many cuts to MediCal and to schools? Support our students, because the future depends on them. We hope you’ll reconsider your decisions.

Sincerely,

A mom

Other letters, like that of Mercedes, demonstrated heightened political astuteness, argumentative coherence, and elaborated diction:
Dear Governor Schwarzenegger,

Reviewing some articles in the newspaper, we have seen that you haven’t fulfilled the promises you made. You meet with business people in order to raise funds for your campaign, while budget cuts are made to schools, depriving so many children of the preparation necessary to have a better future.

The future of many children is in your hands and you’re not doing anything to make improvements but rather to make budget cuts and at the same time, cuts in teachers and workers. It’s unfair that schools are closing. All of us have a right to benefits, to education, and to work to try to become better people.

Instead of wasting so much money on publicity campaigns, all that money could be used for schools, hospitals, benefits for the needy, etc. That would gain for you much more and even better publicity.

Sincerely,
A mom

The variations in parents’ communicative skills in writing was, like their varying backgrounds, another indication of their homogeneity as a group. Yet in creating these letters and voicing their concerns, all of the parents acted in unison as community supporters and legitimate peripheral participants in California’s political process, with Mercedes, an innovative leader in the process.

4.2.4.2 Other Roles, Identities, and Relations to and around Print

Alma, Helena, and Mercedes were not the only vocal contributors to class activities and discussions. Among the focal mothers, Lupe and Rosa, too, were frequent, vociferous class participants. In fact, among focal and non-focal participants alike, if a parent was print literate, she or he was more likely to contribute to class discussions in terms of several measures: frequency of voluntary (not initiated by the teacher) contributions, volume of voice, length of time that they held the floor, and general confidence of expression. Still, if the least print literate parents were less vocal overall, as noted above, they tended
to take the lead in terms of seeking help from more print literate classmates, tutors, and teachers:

As soon as I walked into the Basic Spanish literacy classroom, after facilitating the literature circle with the more advanced readers, Margarita, who hadn’t been assigned a partner yet, latched onto me right away. "¡Maestra, maestra!" she called to me, eager to work with somebody. (Fieldnote excerpt, 11/8/04)

Again, unlike in Klassen and Burnaby (1993), in Ernestina’s classrooms there was no stigma attached to inexperience with print, and thus no stigma attached to seeking help with print literacy tasks. Thus, whether more or less print literate, all parents confidently sought help where needed or desired. Carolina’s daughter Soledad, for instance, came to class to seek help in dealing with the District, which wanted to transfer her preschooler, Lydia, to another school for kindergarten. Since Carolina walked both Lydia and Juanito to school, freeing up Soledad to go to work, a transfer for Lydia would be a great inconvenience to the family, so Soledad wanted to know how to contest it. Rosa, in a similar vein, when she became concerned about some of Kathy’s test scores, sought advice from teachers and classmates on how to get a satisfactory response from Jefferson officials (Chapter 6).

But despite the availability of help, frustrations also arose. For Rosa, in-class writing was a frustration during the fall semester of 2004, when, during 45-minute class sessions, we would take about 35 minutes to discuss, and then 10 minutes to write reflections on Esperanza Renace, the novel we were reading collectively. Thus, as much as she enjoyed reading and had read many favorite books—including Esperanza Renace, Laura Esquivel’s Como agua para chocolate, and Víctor Villaseñor’s Lluvia de oro—three or more times, Rosa expressed discomfort with writing in this academic—and admittedly very brief—setting. Thus, while she was a vocal, effective class participant in group discussions, her loquaciousness did not translate into prolific writing.

It should be noted, too, that all of the mothers experienced different levels of mechanical difficulties with writing, in that even the most print literate among them generally wrote without use of correct punctuation, and many of them experienced different issues with segmentation and spelling. Such mechanical issues are evident in the following samples of the mother’s writing from the fall semester of 2004 (in response to Esperanza renace), yet their powers of understanding and interpretation are equally palpable:
Cada vez que pienso algo en el campamento esperanza
me preocupan demasiado pero Alba aún va meditando y con
el tiempo y con el trabajo que ella va realizando va ganando
haciendo cada día y las niñas que están encerradas en ella también con la tormenta de tiempo de las
inundaciones de marea y se encuentran muy presas de ella por que ella no sabe que tan fuerte es la
infección que tiene la misma y lo que periódicamente se quiere que su muerte también se muera
y no quiere que su muerta también se muera
por que ya perdió a su papá y no quiere pasar
por lo mismo a su misma de sentir sola porque
por su misma a su misma de sentir sola porque

Rosa

Que era la familia de Esperanza para evitar las

Rosa
A reflection written by Helena, November 3, 2004:

Unedited transcript:
Cada vez que pasa algo en el campamento esperanza se preocupa demasiado pero también va madurando con el tiempo y con el trabajo que ella va realizando va aprendiendo cada día y los niños se están encariñando con ella también con la tormenta de tierra se esta enfermando su mamá y se encuentra muy preocupada porque ella no sabe que tan fuerte es la infección que tiene su mamá y lo que piensa que no quiere que se muera también su mamá pues ya perdió a su papá y no quiere pasar por lo mismo a demas se siente sola porque su abuelita se encuentra muy lejos de ella y alo mejor en ese momento ella quisiera que estuviera con ella pues sería un gran apoyo para ella.

Helena

Transcript I have edited:
Cada vez que pasa algo en el campamento, Esperanza se preocupa demasiado. Pero también va madurando con el tiempo y con el trabajo que ella va realizando, va aprendiendo cada día y los niños se están encariñando con ella. También con la tormenta de tierra se está enfermando su mamá y [Esperanza] se encuentra muy preocupada porque ella no sabe que tan fuerte es la infección que tiene su mamá. Y lo que piensa que no quiere que se muera también su mamá, pues ya perdió a su papá y no quiere pasar por lo mismo. Además, se siente sola porque su abuelita se encuentra muy lejos de ella y a lo mejor en ese momento ella [Esperanza] quisiera que estuviera con ella, pues sería un gran apoyo para ella.

Helena

My translation:
Each time that something happens in the camp, Esperanza worries too much. But she’s also maturing with time and with the work she is undertaking, she’s learning each day and the children are growing fond of her. Also, with the dust storm, her mother has fallen ill and she [Esperanza] finds herself very worried because she doesn’t know how strong the infection is that her mother has. And what she thinks is that she doesn’t want her mother to die, too, since she already lost her father and doesn’t want to go through that again. In addition, she feels alone because her grandmother is very far from her and [it’s] likely that in that moment she [Esperanza] wishes she could be with her, since that would be a great support to her.

Helena
Questions written by Rosa and two non-focal mothers on October 27, 2004, in response to a prompt to first question what they have read versus initially giving answers or explanations (the mothers received a list of question words in Spanish as part of the prompt):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unedited transcript:</th>
<th>Transcript I have edited:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hará la familia de Esperanza para evitar las represalias del tío Luis?</td>
<td>¿Qué hará la familia de Esperanza para evitar las represalias del tío Luis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My translation:
What will Esperanza’s family do to avoid Uncle Luis’ reprisals?
Rosa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unedited transcript:</th>
<th>Transcript I have edited:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My translation:
How long will Esperanza’s mother be sick? How will she [Esperanza] take this? Will Esperanza be able to take it?
Rosa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unedited transcript:</th>
<th>Transcript I have edited:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué? ¿Qué pasará con la Familia de esperanza. ¿Por qué? Porque le dijo Miguel a Esperanza en México estamos en orillas opuestas del río. ¿Podrá? Esperanza, Podrá recuperarse de la muerte de su Papá. ¿Cuándo? terminará el dolor y la tristeza de perder a una persona querida. [final words lost in process of photocopying]</td>
<td>¿Qué? ¿Qué pasará con la Familia de esperanza. ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué le dijo Miguel a Esperanza en México que están en orillas opuestas del río? ¿Podrá? ¿Esperanza podrá recuperarse de la muerte de su papá? ¿Cuándo? ¿Cuándo] terminará el dolor y la tristeza de perder a una persona querida?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My translation:
What? [What] will happen with Esperanza’s family? Why? Why did Miguel tell Esperanza in Mexico that they’re on opposite shores of the river? Can [she]? Can Esperanza recover from the death of her dad? When? [When] will the pain and sadness of losing a loved one end?
Rosa
In the above samples, Helena provides an ample summary of the book’s events and their effects on the character development of the protagonist, Esperanza. In addition, Rosa and two anonymous non-focal mothers skilfully demonstrate that they can question a text before seeking answers, a reading strategy that Ernestina frequently emphasized in the morning and afternoon literature circles and the basic Spanish literacy classes, and that she encouraged parents to use at home with their children as well. The second of the non-focal mothers, in fact, included the question words, given to the literature circle as prompts, as headings to her questions. In addition, her second question insightfully points to the issue of social class differences brought out in the book, and her final question is eloquently posed in such a way that it could apply specifically to the protagonist, or broadly to any character or reader.

The power of the mothers’ insights and understanding, however, is not complemented in kind by a mastery of the mechanics of writing. Helena, the most formally educated of all the study’s participants, for example, has effectively written one run-on sentence with no punctuation. Despite her insights, common misspellings and word segmentation difficulties (e.g., “alo” instead of a lo, “a demas” instead of Además) also appear. Rosa and the other mothers likewise write with errors and inconsistencies in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and accents. Some of this, of course, may be due to the time pressures of writing during brief periods in class with little opportunity to edit. However, the frequency and extent of their errors indicates that the mothers simply had not experienced enough instruction in self-editing to be able to correct these mechanical errors, even if much more class time had been dedicated to writing. This accounting of the mothers’ mechanical difficulties with writing should not be interpreted as a devaluing in any way their achievements in print literacy and school involvement. But it is important to elaborate upon their difficulties in order to give a sense of what they could be up against if asked, for instance, to provide substantial instruction in mechanics at home. Specifically, while the mothers demonstrated a wide range of abilities in creating home support and interaction around print literacy activities, most would not likely, I suspect, be able to proofread a written homework assignment, a common task that teachers expect of educated, middle class parents in the U.S.5

4.2.4.3 Gaining Confidence and Legitimacy: The Case of Margarita Galarza

The difficulties the mothers experienced with print, in fact, were miniscule in comparison to their accomplishments. Even a bashful, reticent mother like Margarita Galarza, slowly and methodically grew into an increasingly literate identity, with understandable frustrations gradually ceding to puras ganas, sheer will. When I first began to observe Margarita in the 2003-2004 school year, I often noted her shyness, silence, and difficulties in the classroom:

5 I feel compelled to insert a personal note here. My own mother, the daughter of Italian immigrants with little formal education, received no proof-reading assistance from her own parents. Still, without such parental assistance, my mother earned a bachelor’s degree and a teaching credential. An avid reader and keen-eyed editor, my mother insisted on helping me with this dissertation by proofing it, just as she proofed dozens of essays and term papers throughout my many years of schooling. She serves as example, then, as a child who learned to edit texts without benefit of parental editors, and as a mother, who, like her own mother and those in this study, did whatever she could to help her child succeed in school and in life.
Margarita wrote her name down on a piece of paper. She erased it and began again. Then she pulled up her chair to the whiteboard so that she could see it better to copy down the words that the class had generated. Margarita had written down five words so far. Then she ripped out the page, crumpled it, and started over. I asked her why she re-did things, but she just smiled and laughed. (Fieldnote excerpt, 9/8/03)

Gregorio [a classmate] gave a very full and detailed summary of the article that his group had read. It was about an immigrant woman from Mexico and all that she has had to endure to superar y sobrevivir [get ahead and survive]. Adriana and Arnaldo [another classmate] filled in a few more details. Then Ernestina asked Margarita for input, but she responded with her characteristic shyness, with a smile and shake of her head. (Fieldnote excerpt, 12/10/03)

During a pre-reading exercise in which Ernestina asked the class to “ojear el libro” [have a look at the book] and anticipate what it was about, 8 of the 11 students in attendance [at a Fundamental Spanish literacy class] gave vocal input to the discussion. Margarita, on the other hand, said something so quietly that I didn't catch it, even though I was sitting next to her. She smiled and giggled. (Fieldnote excerpt, 2/23/04)

But despite her shyness, Margarita expressed ganas:

In response to the [Fundamental Spanish literacy] class’ reading and discussion of Jon J. Muth’s Las tres preguntas (The three questions), based on a story by Tolstoy, Ernestina asked the class why it’s important to ask questions. Eight of the ten adults in attendance gave responses. Arnaldo noted, for instance, that if you don’t ask questions, you can’t find answers. Only Margarita and another woman kept quiet. Then Ernestina asked the class to get out our notebooks and write 5 questions. “Vamos a ser filósofos” [We’re going to be philosophers], she said, echoing the theme of the book. She suggested writing down questions that had no easy answers and later asked us to read our favorite question aloud for the class, starting with Adriana and then going around the room. “Qué va a pasar mañana?” [What’s going to happen tomorrow], said Adriana, laughing as she read her question. Then it was Margarita’s turn: ¿Cuándo aprenderé a leer?” [When will I learn to read?] she asked, a bit wistfully. (Fieldnote excerpt, 3/1/04)

Margarita had asked a question that had no easy answer, and she knew it. Yet by the time the new school year began, her shyness had begun to dissipate. For instance, along with Jorge, a grandfather and regular participant in the basic Spanish literacy classes, she took the initiative in seeking out classes for the new school year:

After a meeting with Ernestina and two District officials to map out plans for the coming year, Margarita and Jorge spontaneously stopped by Ernestina’s
classroom. Classes for parents hadn't been scheduled yet, but they were excited to begin and just stopped by to enquire. We had some snacks that Ernestina had on hand, and we chatted and exchanged hugs. Margarita and Jorge were all smiles and excitement, pleased to hear that classes would begin again in two weeks. (Fieldnote excerpt, 9/13/04)

When classes began again in 2004-2005, Margarita began to work faster, and her voice became literally audible in the classroom for the first time:

*Although she had been so quiet last year, Margarita was now reading syllables (the ones she'd just written down) in a loud voice. Ernestina exclaimed, ¡Margarita, excelente! (Fieldnote excerpt, 10/4/04)*

*As I looked around the class while we were doing group work, I noticed Margarita, who last year seemed to work with even greater difficulty than what I now noticed in a beginner like Carolina. Margarita was really zippin' away, and her decoding was quicker. When Ernestina later called us back together as a class and asked us to call out answers, I heard Margarita's voice loud and clear. Where she used to sound so shy, and you just didn't hear her voice amongst the dull roar of the classroom, now she was picking up her voice, and she seemed happier, too. I had never seen her smile so much, other than the typical shy, sheepish smile that she had worn so frequently last year. (Fieldnote excerpt, 10/11/04)*

But even with Margarita’s growing confidence, she faced many challenges with print literacy, as did I in trying to figure out how to best work with her:

*Toward the end of the Basic Spanish literacy hour, during which Margarita and I had worked together, she used the syllables we’d generated to form the word "latinas". So I said, oh, that’s a good word. Let’s write that down, ‘latinas.’ And then she chimed in with a sentence, "Son latinas ellas". I said, oh, that’s great you've got a sentence there. Let's write down the sentence. I first wrote it in my notebook, and she copied it down in hers. She needed that visual aid to be able to print, to encode, the sentence herself. Then I taught her how to write a period. The first time she tried to write a period, it came out looking like a hyphen. I said, well that's not quite a period. It's a little long and it looks like a hyphen, a guión. Then she wrote another one, and I said, that looks like a comma, which it did. I showed her again and told her that period looks like a little punto. So the third time she wrote a period. I told her that that's how we know a group of words is a sentence, a full sentence, because there’s a period at the end. But honestly, even with a master’s degree in Romance linguistics, I realized then that I had no idea of how to explain the concept of ‘sentence’ to Margarita in a way that I was sure would be meaningful to her. (Fieldnote excerpt, 11/8/04)*
Still, whatever the challenges, whether her own or those of her instructors, Margarita faced them with increasing optimism. I suspect that despite her awareness of the difficulties she faced, she was also acutely aware of the progress she was making. Margarita had begun to decode, something she had never before been able to do.

4.3 Further Reflections on the Classroom as a Generative Space for Literacy Development

Margarita’s progress, in fact, blossomed on fertile ground, in a generative space unencumbered by the humiliations of the broader social world beyond her Jefferson classroom. But if Jefferson had provided parents like Margarita with refuge from the cruelties of a broader social context, and indeed of life itself, it did so for other mothers as well. Lupe Machado was a case in point.

4.3.1 The Generative Space as a Place of Refuge

In one of our many meetings together, Lupe confided in me, “Me he refugiado mucho en la escuela” (I have taken great refuge in schooling). An on-the-job accident had left Lupe with debilitating back pain. The medication she was prescribed helped ease her back pain but in turn caused her stomach pain. For Lupe, reading, schooling, parent involvement, and community involvement all served as refuge from constant pain:

Lupe: Pues ha sido muy difícil, maestra. Me he…me ha dado muchos nervios y pues cuando vengo yo a la escuela es lo que me…me distrae, me mantiene ya más tranquila. Porque antes me preocupaba mucho en la casa y estaba ahí y empecé a venir así al, al Café [con el Director] los martes y empecé con la maestra [Ernestina] […].

Ernestina lent Lupe books by Francisco Jiménez, including his Cajas de cartón (Chapter 4). Next, Ernestina lent her Víctor Villaseñor’s Lluvia de oro, a fascinating 600-page account of the authors’ ancestors’ lives in Mexico and their ultimate migration to the U.S. Lupe was so taken with the book that she asked me to find the Spanish version of the sequel, Trece sentidos (Thirteen senses) on the Internet. Luckily, Ernestina happened upon us during our Internet search and explained that she already had a copy of the sequel that she could lend to Lupe, and she immediately did.

But seeking out opportunities to read and to become more involved at Jefferson School didn’t originally come about because of Lupe’s back pain. As she described the process of how she became increasingly involved with print and with Jefferson, it was the invitations of Principal Julio Serrano and maestra Ernestina Olmedo, coupled with the opportunity for social networking with other mothers, that got Lupe involved even before she had injured her back:

Ali: ¿Cómo se enteró de ese…[Café con el Director]?
Lupe: Ah…siempre…siempre hay casi en las escuelas siempre hay eso. Pero prácticamente es con el director y con dos tres personas nada más. Pero aquí cuando yo vine […] y traje a mi niña y me paré ahí enfrente con [ella]…estaba el director…
Ali: ¿Este año [2004-2005]?
Lupe: Sí, y estaba el director ahí diciendo pues que, ‘Los invito ahorita a salir de aquí [de la entrada de la escuela], que vayan las mamás al patio [a la asamblea escolar diaria]…y yo que me quedé mirando y…y pues no conocía a nadie ni nada y entonces y ya empecé a platicar así con una señora que se llama Beatriz. Dice, ‘Yo siempre ven- go [a las asambleas diarias y cafés semanales]’. Le digo yo, ‘Es la primera vez que vengo’. Dos o tres veces [asistí a las asambleas] y ya empezamos a platicar y empecé a…a venir y a venir y a venir. Y todavía estaba trabajando incluso cuando fue el club de lectura [Club de Lectores] que dijo la maestra [Ernestina], ‘¿Usted no se inscribe [en el Club]?’ Le dije, ‘Sí maestra,’ le dije, ‘pero yo [en] mis descansos’. Todavía estábamos trabajando, le dije. ‘Mi descanso es el lunes y martes’, le dije […].[Pero] como me puse muy mal, me lo cambiaron […] o sea el viernes entraba a trabajar a las siete de la mañana. Entonces le dije a la maestra, ‘Yo puedo venir lunes, martes, miércoles y jueves pero el viernes no’, le digo, ‘porque el viernes entro a trabajar temprano’.
Como una vez fui [al trabajo]…dos veces fui así a ese horario pero después ya no pude trabajar […]. No pude trabajar entonces fue cuando agarré todo el el programa las ocho semanas que hicimos [el Club de Lectores] entonces los agarré [los otros programas] y pues hasta ahorita la maestra me empezó a prestar libros.
Ali: How did you find out about that [Coffee with the Principal]?
Lupe: Ah, always…always…almost always in schools they have them. But usually it’s with the principal and two or three other people, that’s all. But here when I came […] and I brought my daughter to school and I stood in front with [her]…there was the principal.
Ali: This year [2004-2005]?
Lupe: Yes, and the principal was there saying, well, ‘I invite you all right now to leave here [the school entrance] and for the mothers to go to the blacktop [for the daily school assembly]. And I stood there looking around and…and well, I didn’t know anyone or anything and then I began to chat with a lady named Beatriz. She said, ‘I always come [to the daily assemblies and weekly coffees]’. I said to her, ‘It’s the first time that I’ve come.’ Two or three more times [I attended the assemblies] and we began to chat and I began to attend and attend and attend some more. And I was still working even when the reading club [Readers’ Club] was going on, and the maestra [Ernestina] said, ‘Aren’t you going to enroll [in the Club]?’ I said, ‘Yes, maestra, ‘but on my days off.’ I was still working then, I told her. ‘My days off are Monday and Tuesday,’ I said. But because I became very ill [injured], they changed [my schedule], so that Fridays I worked at 7:00 in the morning. So I said to the maestra, ‘I can attend Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, but not on Fridays,’ I said, ‘because on Fridays I go to work early.’ So I went [to work] one time and two times on that schedule but after I could no longer work. I could no longer work, [and] that’s when I latched onto everything…the eight-week program we did [the Readers’ Club] and I latched onto them [the other programs] and from then until now the maestra has lent me books.

It is important to note that Lupe’s parent involvement went hand in hand with her involvement in literacy in its fullest sense. Ernestina not only sought out Lupe’s assistance with the Readers’ Club but also to enrich Lupe herself by exposing her to literature she
thought Lupe would enjoy. This exchange is a prime example of how Jefferson parent programs sought not only to take from parents, but more importantly, to enrich them with literacy in its fullest sense, with opportunities to read the word and the world, and to interact with children, parents, and teachers in a supportive environment. This supportive setting, the generative space for literacy, simultaneously centered on parents and print, helping parents to make sense not only of print but also of their complicated lives, providing them with a compassionate environment in an otherwise hostile world.

4.3.2 Literacy as a Seat of Challenge and of Accomplishment

In this supportive space, opportunities for print literacy and parent involvement could and often did go hand in hand. Since whole literacy development entails personal development (Freire, 1993 [1970]), this meant that parent involvement at Jefferson was not limited to a one-way relationship in which parents contributed to the school but not vice versa. Certainly, as we shall see in the following chapter, some parent involvement activities, such as volunteering at the school store or assisting during sight and hearing tests, fit the traditional model in which parents gave but received little tangible benefit for their participation. In the case of opportunities for interaction with print, however, there were rippling benefits: opportunities for parents to share literature and literacies, to network around literacies, and to grow and share their growth with their children. Alma Rivera, for example, felt a deep sense of accomplishment and a renewed sense of identity in volunteering for the Club de Lectores. Said Alma about her participation in the program “Me sentí como si fuera una verdadera maestra” (I felt as if I were a real teacher). Indeed, in looking back at the mothers’ work with literacy, on their own behalf as well as their children’s, it was easy to find a long list of accomplishments. Among the mothers with the strongest background in print literacy and whose children attended kindergarten through fifth grade at Jefferson—Alma, Helena, Lupe, and Rosa—all volunteered for the Club de Lectores. And among the mothers with little background in print literacy, namely, Carolina and Margarita, important progress had been made: they had learned basic encoding and gained exposure to literature, but more importantly, they felt the door of formal education, closed to them for so many years, finally open and begin to expose its opportunities. Within the family, Carolina’s and Margarita’s children aided in their mothers’ literacy development, and the women likewise encouraged the same in their own children. All of these admirable women, did not, as some of the literature might have us believe, eschew education and literacy development. Rather, as we shall see in the next chapter, the mothers frequently sought for their children precisely the kinds of access that they themselves had been denied.

5. Conclusion: Links Between Print literacy and Parent Participation

Links between print literacy and parent participation are not skills-based, but knowledge-based. They necessarily involve reading the world, but not necessarily reading the word. Anyone who possesses the requisite skills can read words for someone else, an activity frequently observed within family literacy networks, in what I refer to as hybrid, multidirectional, multimodal, and often multilateral, participation structures. But reading the world involves knowledge, astuteness, powers of interpretation, and confidence—confidence in one’s identity, one’s culture, one’s story, oneself—to voice the ideas that emanate from within. Parents hailed from different backgrounds and had expe-
rienced different barriers to formal education and acquiring print literacy. But parent programs at Jefferson School, mirroring the home itself, provided a venue, a generative space, for multidirectional exchanges and legitimate peripheral participation in the development of print literacy i.e., reading the word, and in the development of whole literacy, i.e., reading the world, not to mention the whole person. For many parents at Jefferson, then, literacy development complemented parent participation, and vice versa, contributing to parents’ sense of accomplishment and enhancing their sense of self.
Chapter 6: Parent Involvement in Education and in *la educación*

...yo quise buscar un mejor porvenir para mis hijas.
...I wanted to seek a better future for my daughters.

—Lupe Machado

1. **Introduction: ** *Education* and *la educación*: Contributions to Broader Understandings of Parent Participation

   As Valdés (1996), Zentella (2005a), and others explain, *education*—or schooling—is not a direct translation of its Spanish cognate, *la educación*, more broadly described as a well-mannered upbringing, one designed to bring about good character, imbued with values like service to others, cooperation, and respect. Such values represent some of the cultural moorings that the mothers brought from their native Mexico, moorings that helped shape the mothers’ understandings of *education* in the U.S. context while maintaining their values anchored to, among other ideals, *la educación*. The mothers’ broad understandings of *education* coupled with *la educación* may help explain, at least in a metaphorical sense, their comparatively broad view of the range of practices, outlined in this chapter, which for them constitute “parent involvement” in one’s children’s education. In addition, *la educación* and *education* can likewise serve as a metaphor for the intersecting paths of the mothers’ cultural underpinnings and current social milieu. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, and aptly cited by Graue and her colleagues (2001:473), the Russian theorist Bakhtin explains how our historical trajectories and social surroundings coalesce to shape our ways of understanding others’ words and reacting to them:

   "I live in a world of others’ words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or in other semiotic materials). The other’s word sets for a person the special task of understanding this word (such as task does not exist with respect to one’s own word, or it exists in an entirely different sense). (Bakhtin, 1986:143)"

The word, in Bakhtin’s terms, is thus dialogized, its history continually refracted through the lens of others’ interpretations, enactments, and pronouncements. But if Bakhtin’s focus is on the *word*, it is as a representation, a social semiotic in a *world* of others’ words, and of our refractions and reactions to them, mutually reverberating over the course of a lifetime. Thus, reading the word for Bakhtin is more closely aligned with what Freire and Macedo (1987) call reading the *world*. As I have stressed throughout this dissertation, the mothers engaged in reading the world in many instances in their new surroundings as immigrants in the U.S. This theme was precisely articulated by Carolina Sandoval in speaking of *el estudio*—study—as the process of learning to “read” her new neighborhood, her new world of knowing “*para saber cómo agarrar un camión...ir al doctor, todo eso*” (in order to know how to grab a bus...go to the doctor, all that). In deciphering
the lay of a new land such as their children’s school, the mothers likewise needed to read a new world with a new set of rules, which, as Lareau (1994, 1996, 2000, 2001) has explained, are often unspoken and implicitly understood only in U.S. middle class contexts. But relying on the roadmap of their cultural understandings while gathering new experiences—from programmed classes to informal interactions—at their children’s schools, the mothers grew in knowledge of “the rules of the game” (Lareau and Horvat, 1999; following Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) both spoken and unspoken, at Jefferson School. At the same time, the mothers pushed the envelope, enacting a “modicum of agency” (Holland et al., 1998), ever so slightly refracting and extending the boundaries of what counts as parent participation. Enriched by their heritage as well as by their social interaction at Jefferson, the mothers enacted and articulated, as depicted below, a view of parent participation of great depth and breadth, pushing to new expansions definitions that could in turn enrich the thinking of educators and researchers.

In sum, in keeping with the Bakhtinian emphasis of bringing one’s history and culture to one’s current social milieu, this chapter examines the mothers’ views of parent involvement not only currently, but also through the lens of their cultural and life experiences. Moreover, while the previous chapter focused on the mothers’ access to and interaction with formal education and print literacy, including the family literacy network, the current chapter hones in on their efforts on behalf of their children, their children’s school, and their surrounding community; for, as explained repeatedly to me by some of the mothers, quite in keeping with their views of la educación, the value of a formal education is highly limited if not employed in service to others.

1.1 Definitions of Parent Involvement

As reviewed in Chapter 2, adapting the analysis of Graue and her colleagues (2001), scholarly approaches to parent involvement can be viewed as centered on three principal axes:

- a prescriptive strand, which describes and prescribes presumed ideal practices that parents and teachers should be expected to perform;
- a quantitative strand, which has sought to isolate certain variables in order to predict which parent behaviors or cultural traits, frequently those promoted in the prescriptive literature, yield the most effective results in children’s academic achievement; and
- an interpretive strand, ethnographic and other qualitative studies that have sought to illuminate, rather than prescribe, parental practices and perspectives.

Much of the interpretive literature (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; Fine, 1993; Graue et al., 2001; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Reay, 1998; Valdés, 1996; Vincent, 1996) has critically challenged the first two strands, pointing out tacit cultural assumptions that circumscribe definitions of parent involvement and confound the conclusions of prescriptive approaches and of many quantitative studies (Lareau, 2001). The prescriptive and quantitative literature tended to focus on the child socialization practices and micro habits of this class of parents, holding these practices and habits as the standard by which all others are measured. When targeting parents of
varying ethnic backgrounds and low socioeconomic status (SES), these studies have typically arrived at a foregone conclusion, depicting low-income and/or minority parents as lacking in middle class cultural and economic resources, and, ergo, as educationally less involved (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2000).

Ethnographic and other qualitative studies of parent involvement such as this one, however, have sought to reveal the social and cultural moorings inherent in parent practices and perspectives, thus expanding definitions of parent involvement (Graue et al., 2001). Many studies, for instance, have revealed both important contrasts as well as overlooked convergences between the home and school cultures surrounding Latin@ families (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2004; González, 1999; Moll et al., 1992; Moreno and Valencia, 2002; Trueba, 1999; Valdés, 1996; Vásquez et al., 1994; Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 1992; Villenas and Foley, 2002; Zentella, 1997, 2005). While many of these studies have focused alternatively upon home-school similarities or differences, the present study has sought greater illumination of the interwoven complexity of both facets of home-school relations. In fact, as elaborated in the next chapter, convergences and contrasts were at times perceived in different ways by different actors—parents, teachers, and administrators: in some cases, one person’s convergence was another’s contrast. In light of this phenomenon, apparently stemming from actors’ varying social, cultural, and locative orientations, this study sought its bearings, i.e., determined its unit of analysis, based on the definitions of parent involvement as described by the focal mothers themselves. While Chapters 4 and 5 endeavored to reveal the social and historical contexts, especially vis-à-vis print literacy, which served as the foundation for focal mothers’ participation in their children’s education, this chapter seeks to illuminate their perspectives through an examination of additional parent involvement practices beyond those centered on print literacy. This chapter assumes that definitions of parent involvement must emerge organically from an examination of parent involvement practices in situ, moored in the perspectives of those who engage, as they engage, in the process. Only such an emic (Erickson, 1986) perspective can reveal the true extent of parents’ involvement and concern for their children’s education, beyond the European-American middle class social and cultural assumptions that have continued to dominate the parent involvement literature.

1.2 Toward a Parent-Based Definition of Parent Involvement

This study uses the terms “parent participation” and “parent involvement” interchangeably. Although some studies may define these terms differently, with, e.g., “involvement” relating to specific home activities such as homework supervision, and “participation” relating to school activities such as joining the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), this study subscribed to no such specifications but instead sought the views of its focal participants, which took shape as follows in seven general categories:

1) **Presence at school**: i.e., on the school grounds, including attendance at school functions (e.g., assemblies, coffees, meetings, open houses, parent classes, and parent-teacher conferences), and general presence on campus before, during, or after school;

2) **Communication with and within the school**: e.g., networking with other parents and with teachers and/or administrators; advocating for one’s children at school;
3) **Involvement in school and community activities**: participation such as volunteering, engaging in political activities, and community organizing;

4) **Literacy support at home** (see Chapter 5): employing or otherwise promoting literacy and numeracy at home;

5) **Material support**: providing e.g., food, shelter, clothing, hygiene, transportation, school supplies, and enrollment in enrichment programs; providing enrichment activities outside of school;

6) **Moral support**: e.g., encouraging children or keeping after them as needed; recognizing that different children need different kinds of support; reminding children to take advantage of the educational opportunities before them;

7) **Parental determination**: seeking to give their children a better future; acting as perseverant, positive role models for their children.

In response to the question, “¿Qué puede hacer una mamá o un papá para ayudar a su hijo en la escuela?” (What can a mom or dad do to help his or her child in school?), all of the above items were specifically verbalized by two to four mothers as things that they had done to help their children succeed in school. Moreover, all of the mothers either reported engaging in all of the above categories, or teachers or administrators reported the mothers’ engagement, and/or I observed it myself firsthand.

Note that among these broad lines of participation, there is commonality in the parents’ perceptions and the different strands of the literature, i.e., prescriptive, quantitative, and qualitative. At the same time, however, the mothers brought up and enacted more wide-ranging practices than generally acknowledged in much of the literature. For instance, while the prescriptive literature has tended to focus on participation in specific school organizations, usually the PTA or school site council, (e.g., Comer et al., 1996) the focal mothers saw mere presence on campus as an opportunity to interact with other members of the school community—children, school officials, and other parents—and thus as an opportunity to learn about the progress of their children and happenings at school. Similarly, the prescriptive literature, even when touting “two-way communication” has typically focused on unidirectional communication from school to parent (Swap, 1993), or to prescribe teacher-initiated communication (Epstein, 2002), yet the mothers often initiated communication with school officials and with each other, essentially networking in order to grasp the lay of the land, to “read the world” of the U.S. educational system, and specifically that of Jefferson School. As another example, material support, in the mothers’ definition, didn’t necessarily include the prescriptive literature’s typical call for a quiet place at home to study. Rather, it included activities that some middle class parents might take for granted, such as efforts to provide nutritious food, shelter, and transportation to school.

What follows is a detailed examination of the mothers’ participation in the aforementioned activities, including the mothers’ presence on campus, endeavors in volunteering and social networking, and efforts to provide material and moral support. All of the mothers’ efforts can be viewed, I will argue, as attempts to generate social and cultural capital to benefit their families and help their children succeed in school. The chapter concludes with the mothers’ accounting of their aspirations for a better future for their children and, to that end, focal parents’ frequent efforts to do whatever they could to pro-
vide their children with educational opportunities to which they themselves had had little or no access in life.

2. Attendance at School Functions and Presence on Campus
2.1 School Functions
In addition to parent classes, school functions in which parents participated included parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school night and open houses, assemblies held on the Jefferson blacktop each morning, monthly meetings in the Migrants Program, awards ceremonies with pot luck dinners, and other events, sometimes held in conjunction with the local youth center, such as the annual Halloween haunted house, Thanksgiving dinner, and Easter egg hunt. For teachers, however, the most important of these is arguably the parent-teacher conference, a topic to which I now briefly turn.

2.1.1 Parent-Teacher Conferences, Back-to-School, and Open House
Lawrence-Lightfoot contends that “the essential conversation,” i.e. parent-teacher conferences, reflects a “clash of cultures between the two primary arenas of acculturation in our society” (2003:xxi), namely, the home and school. But despite this “dreaded moment,” in Lawrence-Lightfoot’s words, of feeling “exposed” (2003:xxi) before a teacher’s eyes, all of the focal mothers reported attending parent-teacher conferences, and none reported feelings of exposure or discomfort. Rather, the challenges mothers reported vis-à-vis conferences tended toward the instrumental, not the emotional. For instance, conference attendance had been difficult for Margarita, according to her eldest daughter Eloisa, who said that neither of her parents had ever learned to drive. Thus, getting to the various schools to which their children, now graduated from high school, had been bused over the years proved highly challenging for her parents, she said. Indeed, Eloisa recalled that Margarita frequently did not attend conferences due to transportation issues (recall from Chapter 5 Margarita’s challenges in navigating public transportation). But Margarita’s perception was markedly different:

Ali: Cuando sus hijos estaban más chiquitos, usted, ¿cómo aprendía cómo iban las cosas en sus clases?
Margarita: Oh…pues necesitaba ir a la escuela yo. Siempre iba ahí a la escuela con ellos. Porque necesitaban…que oí, tienes que venir y pues como yo no sabía ayudarles verdad…ellos me llamaban para que yo fuera a su escuela de mis hijos.
Ali: ¿Ellos? ¿Gente de la escuela?
Margarita: Sí, los maestros. Me tienen que citar. Oy…queremos que venga para explicarles cómo van sus hijos.
Ali: Entonces, ¿tenía como conferencias con los maestros?
Margarita: Sí, siempre así lo hacía.

Ali: When your children were small, how did you learn about how things were going in their classes?

1 This is not to say that such parental discomfort did not necessarily ever occur, but rather that it was never reported by any participants in this program. It should be noted that unlike Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), and in line with the mothers’ own definitions of parent involvement, the present study did not focus on and does not provide an in-depth analysis of the parent-teacher conference. Rather, the current section merely notes how the subject came to light through interviews and observations.
Margarita: Oh…well I needed to go to the school. I always went there to the school with them. Because they needed [me to]…oh you have to go and well, since I didn’t know how to help them, in truth, they would call me in to my children’s school.

Ali: They? People from the school?
Margarita: Yes, the teachers. They had to contact me. Oh…we want you to come to explain to you how your children are doing.
Ali: So, did you have, like, conferences with the teachers?
Margarita: Yes, I always did like that.

Margaret thus reported that she did indeed regularly attend parent-teacher conferences over the years on behalf of her four children. I was not able to fully discern the reason for the discrepancy between Margarita’s and her daughter Eloisa’s perceptions. It was clear, however, that Margarita’s four children, apparently due to practices within this Silicon Valley school district, had attended many different primary and secondary schools over the years, thus confounding Margarita’s and her husband’s efforts to attend every event at their children’s various schools, including, perhaps, events like parent-teacher conferences. At the same time, Eloisa, the eldest child and the only one for whom immigration meant switching midstream from Mexican to U.S. schools, perhaps had the sharpest view of Margarita’s learning curve in adapting to U.S. life and schools.

Whatever the case, few such transportation difficulties emerged for Carolina Sandoval, who relied on her feet to take her back-and-forth to Jefferson several times a day. As reported by Celia Luna, Juanito Sandoval’s fourth-grade teacher, Carolina attended every back-to-school night, open house and parent-teacher conference during the year that Ms. Luna was his teacher:

Ali: What, what’s your perspective on his [Juanito’s] family?
Celia: I’ve met the mother…a few times. She came to every conference. I know she participates in [Parent Coordinator] Ernestina Olmedo’s literacy circles. Um…She is illiterate, I, I know she is not, she can barely sign her name um…but she comes in and asks, not too often but she, she was here for back-to-school night and open house. She has high standards for him. He is the baby of the family so I think they are putting a lot of hope in him. And he knows. Um…they are encouraging him um…he has support and um…yeah, I mean she is doing, she is overcoming her obstacles to make sure her child has those…does well.

In Chapter 7 I’ll return to this excerpt from my interview with Ms. Luna to discuss more fully her perceptions of Juanito and Carolina. In the meantime, note that Carolina attended “every conference.” In fact Ms. Luna was impressed that Carolina attended the open house for the full hour, as the latter was keenly interested in Juanito’s explanations of the work he was doing at school:

Celia: I had Juanito share all of his materials with her [Carolina] and he went over them. That’s more powerful when he goes through his work.
Ali: Aha. And how did she react?
Celia: Oh, she was just listening and looking at all the books, and I am sure it made her feel good to know that her child is learning, you know.
Ali: What kind of projects did he show her?
Celia: Um he showed all the um…his um…curriculum book projects. You know, I don’t think we had any. At the beginning of the year we had more projects. Towards the end not so
many but um… he shared with her the stories he was reading and the writings that um…we’ve written and the novels.

Ali: What kind of things was he reading and writing?

Celia: Um…we read two…literature books this year, um, [including] The Trumpet of the Swan, and so we will keep, you know, writings um, summaries, story maps. So he shared that with her. They do a lot of note taking in my class on grammar, and so he shared all these notes with her and he um…read a little bit to her from the, those stories that we um…that are in the reader and even though they are fourth grade, because I helped them through it ,um…he is aware of it so he shared those with her. So…she sat there, I mean we, she was there the full hour.

Ms. Luna also reported that, in part due to confusion about a well-publicized college and career preparation program also offered that night, only a handful of parents attended open house in her classroom, versus the typical attendance of at least one parent attending on behalf of half of her students. But for Carolina there was no such confusion, and she was engulfed with Juanito and his work for the entire hour of the open house.

Yet another mother, Mercedes Otero, reported impeccable conference and meeting attendance, similar to her reports of perfect school attendance as a child: “No falto a una junta, no falto a lo que sea. Tenemos que estar ahí cuando este de juntas, de, de reuniones” (I don’t miss a conference. I don’t miss anything. We have to be there when um there are conferences, or, or meetings.)

In addition to Carolina, Margarita, and Mercedes, all of the other focal mothers reported (or their children’s teachers reported) regular attendance at official school meetings. Further, focal mothers in the study attended parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights, open houses, and other official meetings, irrespective of their levels of print literacy usage or level of education, with transportation being the only reported obstacle to conference or other event attendance. At the same time, however, I would argue that despite its perceived general import, this type of activity was not central to the mothers’ participation but rather part of a broad constellation of practices including, as we shall see below, a myriad of opportunities for contact, ranging from the formally organized and traditionally documented, like the parent-teacher conference, to impromptu attempts to reach out to teachers, school administrators, and other parents.

2.1.2 Daily Assemblies

In addition to attendance at school functions created specifically for parents, several mothers, including Carolina and Lupe, reported regular attendance at daily assemblies on the school blacktop, which were, in effect, pep rallies led by Principal Julio Serrano to excite and motivate the school community each morning before the start of classes. In fact, the mothers’ participation in the morning assemblies served as their entrée to further involvement at Jefferson School. Ernestina Olmedo’s and Julio Serrano’s invitations to parents outside school each morning attracted parents to the assemblies, Coffees with the Principal on Tuesday mornings, literature circles on Thursday mornings, and evening classes as well. Focal mothers who participated regularly in these morning events, including Alma, Lupe, Helena, and Rosa, frequented these assemblies before moving on to their own parent-oriented activities. Only Margarita and Mercedes, who did not have children at the school, at least not in kindergarten through fifth grade in Mercedes’ case, did not attend Jefferson assemblies, which did not include pre-schoolers.
2.1.3 Other Parent Meetings and Events

Although middle and high schools tend not to offer parent-teacher conferences (except where problems occur), Lupe Machado, whose four children attended three different schools—two at charter high school Silicon Valley College (SVC) Prep, one at Harding Middle School, and one at Jefferson—still attended a variety of parent meetings at all three schools. When Elda (Lupe’s oldest child) was a senior at SVC Prep, the school offered a yearlong series of parent-oriented college preparation meetings. At the end of the final meeting, which Lupe invited me to attend, she and I

...chatted before parting ways. She expressed her feelings of failure: Elda had worked so hard in school, said Lupe, that she felt she had failed her in not having the funds for Elda to attend a four-year college. Although Elda had been accepted to a Cal State campus in Southern California, she would be starting out at Del Valle Community College instead. (An undocumented immigrant, Elda was ineligible for most scholarships, even though she’d been raised in the U.S. since age 3.) Tears welled up in Lupe’s eyes.

When I told Lupe that she had worked hard, too, it reminded her that, in fact, she had been working hard: recently she’d attended a Saturday morning meeting at her son’s middle school despite exhaustion. He’d forgotten to remind her about the meeting until that morning, rousing her out of bed. She had worked all week and was worn-out, having had to catch a 6:00 o’clock bus each morning. But she attended the school meeting, which, from what I gathered, had to do with parenting skills (a subject in which, in my view, Lupe needed no instruction). At SVC Prep, Lupe had attended all five parent meetings that year. She had also attended other meetings at her son’s middle school as well as at Jefferson Elementary. She agreed that it had indeed been a lot of work.

She then remembered back to her own days in school, how her mother expected her, the oldest child, to have the house completely in order before being allowed to go to school. Sometimes there was no time for breakfast before school, so she’d just grab a tortilla and put it in her pocket for later. Sometimes she was so exhausted from getting up early to do housework that she fell asleep in school. She wanted things to be better for her children, she said; for them she wanted school to come first. (Fieldnote excerpt, 6/1/2006)

But even with Lupe’s efforts to put school first for her children and attend a variety of meetings at three schools, Josefina Garza, first-grade teacher to Lupe’s youngest child, did not think of Lupe as an involved parent (Chapter 7).

Another program in which focal parents frequently participated was the school district’s Migrants Program. Despite its name, the program was open to families that drew their income from a variety of industries, such as landscaping, like Helena Contreras’ husband, and construction, like Diego Machado and Juan Sandoval, Lupe’s and Carolina’s respective spouses. As part of the program, parents held monthly meetings and discussed school and community issues, while children, including the children of many focal mothers, attended Saturday school each week.
Helena, in fact, was a pivotal leader in the Migrants Program. A parent officer in the program, Helena initiated a petition against the granting of further liquor licenses in the Jefferson neighborhood and presented this petition at a Migrants meeting, obtaining the signatures of more than 50 parents in attendance. Helena had learned of the program and became involved in it through a teacher’s recommendation, when Helena requested information regarding enrichment programs for children. Helena likewise enrolled her children in the migrants summer program, except for one summer when the family traveled to Mexico, which Helena also considered an educational enrichment opportunity for her children. Such parent meetings, said Helena, helped her to stay informed. The Migrants Program was one of many vehicles through which parents could contribute to their children and their community, and many took advantage of the opportunity: Alma, Carolina, Helena, Mercedes, and Rosa all participated in the program.

2.2 General Presence on Campus

As in the prescriptive parent involvement literature, several of the mothers cited attendance at school functions, such as parent-teacher conferences, as a form of parent involvement, but the mothers more broadly included general presence on the school grounds as a form of parent participation. All focal mothers with younger children were frequently present on campus, whether to drop off and pick them up, volunteer on campus, or participate in a special event.

Mothers with older children were also present on their children’s campus. Lupe attended parent meetings at her son’s middle school and daughters’ high school regularly. And although it was Lupe’s daughters, Elda and Paloma, who’d originally heard about SVC Prep, a new charter school, and investigated it on the internet, it was Lupe who accompanied the girls to the school for the first time, obtained applications, and filled them out. Margarita, for her part, got excused from work in order to attend her children’s graduations, including the most recent one in her family, that of her daughter Diana from Del Valle Community College. Diana had graduated with an associate’s degree in administration of justice, and although Margarita could not name the degree or describe her daughter’s major, she still understood the import of Diana’s accomplishment, as evidenced by Margarita’s efforts to attend the ceremony and prepare a graduation party afterward. Margarita commented on how pleased and proud she was that, at the ceremony, a graduation speaker had recognized the achievement of not only the graduates but also of their parents. After the ceremony, Margarita invited her extended family to celebrate Diana’s accomplishment. She thus supported her daughter’s achievement in ways that revealed an understanding of and pride in its importance.

But lest I give the impression that the mothers were primarily present only at the beginning or end of their children’s educational phases, I shall reemphasize here and in the following sections that they and other mothers were present for their children all along, both in ways traditionally recognized in the parent involvement literature and in ways less recognized, from networking with teachers and other parents, to bringing their children to work as a way to teach values.

2.2.1 Using Campus Presence to Initiate Parent-Teacher Communication

Several focal mothers took advantage of their presence on campus when dropping off or picking up their children. Carolina, for instance, like many parents at Jefferson
School, arrived on foot and accompanied her child to his classroom, occasionally chatting with her son’s teacher to make sure he was keeping up with his schoolwork and behaving in class. Confirming that la educación relates to a well-mannered upbringing characterized by cooperation and respect, Carolina first sought to make sure Juanito was behaving properly in class. Additionally, she wanted to ensure that he was putting his best foot forward with his schoolwork and learning English. As Carolina, explained it,

Ya yo me pasé pa’ dentro [del salón de clase] y empecé a platicar con la maestra y ya le dije que cómo se portaba [Juanito]…dijo “Muy bien”…dice…este, “trabaja muy bien” ya le dije…“Y maestra y si le trae las tareas” porque yo lo vi pues en la tarde que haga tareas y sí se pone a hacer y pues como yo no sé si la hace bien o si la hace mal y ya por eso vengo con la maestra y ya le pregunto… “Maestra, ¿si va a traer las tareas?”…Dice “Sí,” dice “muy bien me las…las trae.” Y ya le pregunto pues que si… si va aprendiendo inglés y ya dice que sí…que poco a poco pero que sí va aprendiendo, este…este niño que tengo [sonríe].

I went inside [the classroom] and began to talk to the teacher and I asked her how he [Juanito] was behaving. “Very well,” she said, um, “he works very well.” And so I said to her, “And maestra, does he bring in his homework?” because I’ve seen to it in the afternoon that he does his homework and yes, he sets to doing his homework and, well, since I don’t know if he does it well or if he does it poorly, and so I go to the teacher and I ask her, “Maestra, he’s bringing in his homework, right?” She says, “Yes,” she says, “very well, he brings it to me.” And I ask her if he’s learning English and she says yes, little by little, but yes, he’s learning English, this boy of mine [smiling].

Importantly, not only did Carolina initiate communication with Juanito’s teacher, Ms. Luna, but she did so by entering inside—“pa’ dentro”—setting foot in a new world—the classroom—to which she had had no access in her native country. Essentially, Carolina entered this world in order to invite Ms. Luna into the Sandoval family literacy network, extending the network beyond the home to the school. Just as Carolina had frequently used her daughters’ print skills to aid her with print tasks in the home, Carolina sought the aid of Ms. Luna to make sure that Juanito was behaving appropriately in class, doing his homework well, turning it in on time, and learning English. Note that Carolina did not seek to apologize for her inexperience with print but simply to request the assistance of another with print-related tasks that she herself could not carry out. She may not have been an adept reader of the word, but she had become an astute reader of the world of Jefferson School, within a year’s time learning how to move within social circles there in ways very different from what she had experienced in her native Mexico. There, in Carolina’s experience, parents did not typically initiate communication with school officials. In fact, in my first interview with Carolina one year prior, when she had been in the U.S. less than a year, while she could name her son’s third-grade teacher, she didn’t know if it was the teacher’s first or last name; nor could she name any of daughter Maribel’s middle school teachers. Within a year, however, not only had Carolina become well acquainted with her son’s teacher, but she had entered a new physical space—the classroom—which, thanks to her regular attendance at parent classes, was no longer the place of her childhood, too distant, geographically and culturally, to allow her entry pa’ dentro.
It should be stressed as well that Carolina, termed “illiterate” by Juanito’s teacher, actually served as conductor of this family literacy network, orchestrating the participation of her children, and now Ms. Luna, to expand the ambit of the network and coordinate a broadened range of practices within it. In much the same way that a political leader assembles a team of advisors, Carolina understood much about her family’s literacy needs at home and at school, and about how to recruit qualified people to address those needs. At home, her motherly authority was all that was needed to enlist her children to perform desired literacy tasks. At school, this otherwise shy and humble woman now confidently entered inside her son’s classroom, having intuited, through casual interactions as well as formal classes at Jefferson School, the so-called “rules of the game,” understanding that this was an appropriate and indeed desirable action to take. Carolina, having no other formal education than her adult literacy classes at Jefferson, had not yet learned to adeptly read the word. But her parental involvement at Jefferson school, including parent classes, assemblies, migrant meetings, and additional social interaction in the form of networking with parents and school officials, had contributed to her understandings of a constellation of new worlds for this new immigrant, worlds including and within Jefferson School and its literacy practices.

As a final note on Carolina’s exchange with Ms. Luna, observe that Carolina closes the above narrative by expressing her pride in her son and his learning, smiling as she told me “este niño que tengo” (lit. ‘this boy that I have,’ or ‘this boy of mine’). Clearly she expressed both her love for her son, as well as her deep concern for his education, elements comingled in her role as mother and her practice as chief conductor of the family literacy network.

3. Networking with and within the School

Communication with and within the school, such as that of Carolina, was a highly commonplace form of networking at Jefferson. Carolina created and used contacts to expand the Sandoval family literacy network for which she served as chief executive. In essence, she was creating social capital to benefit her family. The mamás used such networking—parent-to-school and parent-to-parent communication—in the creation of social capital creation for a variety of educational and related purposes, namely:

• to seek opportunities for personal development and lifelong learning;
• to seek interaction with other parents, share concerns, and initiate queries;
• to seek educational resources and enrichment opportunities for their children;
• to advocate for their children within the educational system; and
• to seek ways to serve the school and community.

Many examples of such networking have emerged in this study, as in the niece who led Carolina to parent literacy classes, and fellow parent Beatriz who led Lupe Machado to the community booster group, Activas en la Comunidad. In addition, because most parent classes and meetings at Jefferson began with announcements of doings in the school and community, mere attendance at one of these meetings frequently led to information about a variety of school and community activities for both parents and children, along with
contacts to other parents already familiar with—and participating in—many of those activities.

Additionally, networking was an effective way for parents to advocate for their children at school, as well as to become involved in school and community support. I now turn first to the more specific topic of parental advocacy at school, and then to a discussion of volunteering at school and in the community.

3.1 Parental Academic Advocacy for Children: Networking with School Officials

I use the term “parental advocacy” as shorthand for parents’ efforts to network with school officials, to inquire, comment, or complain regarding their children’s progress at school. Carolina’s effort to reach out to Ms. Luna was an instance of such parental advocacy. Many such instances emerged in this study. Rosa reported conferring with Kathy’s kindergarten teacher to find out how to help Kathy with mathematics, and Helena inquired about enrichment programs for her children and learned about the Migrants Program. Helena also sought a preschool teacher’s advice as to whether to put her eldest daughter in bilingual education or structured English emersion (SEI). (The teacher advised bilingual education, because Helena’s English was at the intermediate level, and Helena would be able to provide more educational support in Spanish. The teacher also advised that Helena’s husband, born in El Salvador but raised in the U.S., read to the children in English and speak to them in English.) Mercedes, too, sustained frequent contact with daughter Carrie’s school, Olympia Elementary, and was very happy with the fruits of her efforts. Mercedes was able to obtain speech therapy for Carrie at Olympia, and Carrie completely overcame a speech impediment. In addition, Mercedes helped Carrie with her math homework until Carrie improved enough to do it herself. In fact, Mercedes discovered the problem when she caught Carrie forging her mother’s signature on a homework checklist to be signed by the parent. Mercedes immediately reported the incident to Carrie’s teacher, and Carrie’s difficulties with math homework thus came to light.

But not all parents were as satisfied with their efforts as Mercedes. Rosa served as a case in point, as she doggedly sought aid for Kathy, whom Rosa believed was not testing well enough in reading in English. I now discuss this case of parental advocacy and then consider two further cases, that of Soledad, Carolina’s adult daughter, and of Margarita. In the process, I examine the interrelations of various forms of capital, especially social and cultural capital, as parents advocated for their children.

3.1.1 Parental Advocacy and Cultural Capital: Rosa, Soledad, and Margarita

Kathy, the third-grader of focal mother Rosa Anaya, had been an enthusiastic participant in Jefferson’s reading contest, reading an impressive 118 books in both Spanish and English to help make her third grade class the winner of the schoolwide reading competition. In fact, Rosa believed Kathy to be an avid reader, whether in Spanish or English, so Rosa was alarmed, she told me during a class break one day, to find out later in the school year that Kathy’s recent score on a statewide English reading exam was a 2 out of 5, instead of the 3 that would have been expected for Kathy’s grade level. As detailed in my fieldnotes, Rosa recounted to me how she’d sought out several Jefferson officials to try to find out if something could be done to help Kathy improve her reading in English:
**Rosa’s concerns:** Toward the end of the first hour of [Fundamental Spanish Literacy] class this afternoon, after practicing songs for the upcoming clausura [closing ceremony], Rosa and I began to chat during the break. She said there was trouble related to Kathy. Kathy had scored well in reading Spanish, but had scored a 2 [out of 5] in reading English, so Rosa was worried that her daughter wasn’t progressing rapidly enough. Rosa had spoken to Kathy’s teacher, who then sent her to the bilingual resource teacher, Ms. Jenkins. Ms. Jenkins then recommended Rosa speak with the principal, but he didn’t have time to talk at that moment. So Rosa was feeling frustrated, like she was getting the run around. All to whom Rosa had talked during the break seemed to agree that the transition year to English, the third grade, comes with expectations that frequently aren’t met, and that Kathy’s scores would improve by the fourth grade. That was because English is increased a great deal in the fourth grade at Jefferson [from 60 to 85% of class time]. But Rosa worried that the fourth grade test would increase in difficulty, resulting in no net gain for Kathy. Rosa was clearly agitated. Maria and Lucrecia, two other mothers who frequently attended classes at Jefferson, became involved in the conversation along with la maestra Ernestina. All attempted to remind Rosa that bilingual education teachers at Jefferson had warned that the transition from Spanish to English was lengthy and not to panic when a child didn’t master English in the early grades, but none of this made Rosa feel better. Ernestina suggested calling a conference. (Fieldnote excerpt, 4/7/2005)

Whether Rosa’s concerns were well placed, or whether the others were right that Kathy simply needed more time, was not resolved in this study. If Rosa seemed to panic, perhaps it was because, differently from the Spanish and mathematics instruction that Rosa could provide to Kathy at home, Rosa could not provide English instruction. Simply put, advanced English was a form of cultural capital that Rosa did not possess. Yet as we saw in Chapter 5, Kathy acted as an English instructor to Rosa, which certainly increased Kathy’s contact with English and her opportunities to ponder its grammar. Too often, the parent involvement literature, echoed by Rosa’s concerns, fails to acknowledge the cultural capital that children themselves develop in school, which they can and do share with their parents. Precisely what benefits Kathy reaped from this interaction with her mother over the long haul, however, is beyond the scope of this study. But what did emerge with crystalline clarity were Rosa’s overwhelming concern for her daughter’s progress, her knowledge regarding her daughter’s test scores and school officials to seek out for help, and her dogged persistence in search of answers to a perceived educational problem. In the previous chapter, we saw that Kathy was not considered a problem reader at all, and that she participated in the Club de Lectores (Readers’ Club) only because her mother volunteered in this before-school program, which targeted low-scoring readers. Rosa, then, was “on the case” with respect to Kathy’s education, pursuing available resources, from special programs like the Readers’ Club to advice from school officials, even if her efforts as a parent advocate did not always bear immediate fruit.

Note as well that in her conversation with me in the fieldnote entry above, Rosa spontaneously identified the school staff with whom she spoke either by name, job title, or both. This is an important point, as not all focal mothers were able to do this with ease.
Recall that Carolina, when in the U.S. for little more than a year, could not fully name her son’s third-grade teacher, nor could she name any of daughter Maribel’s middle school teachers. Similarly, Margarita could not name her son’s high school; this was not an easy task for someone who could not read or write, she told me. (Additionally, as Eloisa explained to me years later, Margarita’s four children had attended a total of five different high schools.) But Margarita’s hypothesis, that inexperience with print literacy made the task of absorbing school and teacher names more difficult, bears further examination: as it happened, among focal mothers such difficulty emerged principally with Carolina and Margarita, the two with little or no access to print literacy and formal schooling. But more critical than their inexperience with print literacy, I have argued, was their inexperience with formal schooling as an institution, its inner workings, its modes of operation, its rules of engagement, the knowledge of which constitute a form cultural of capital, largely inaccessible, especially initially, to many of the parents in this study. Although in her first year in the U.S. that Carolina struggled with teachers’ names, by the following year she was more cognizant of “the rules of the game,” actually initiating contact with her son’s teacher. Similarly, Helena and Rosa, both frequent classroom volunteers, had no knowledge of this fairly common U.S. practice until they learned of it at their children’s preschool. The absence of certain behaviors among some parents, then, such as persistence in parental advocacy, displays of knowledge about who’s who at school, or other forms of parental involvement, are no indication of a lack of concern but rather of limited access to institutional rules and inner workings, which may involve print literacy but go much deeper still to unspoken forms of cultural capital, understood by those of the dominant society as common knowledge but frequently opaque to outsiders.

But of the many institutional workings surrounding parent involvement that seemed opaque at first—the knowledge of which is a form of cultural capital—some became apparent though social networking, i.e., the development of social capital. In response to forms of cultural capital that remained elusive, such as print literacy for Carolina or advanced English for Rosa, the mothers sought to compensate with social capital, as when Carolina and Rosa sought school officials’ assistance. What Carolina needed and adroitly sought were not immediate “skills” in print literacy (although reading proficiency was certainly her long-term goal within the realm of Fundamental Spanish Literacy classes), but rather a competent, print literate co-participant in her family literacy network, one who could work with her in monitoring the quality of son Juanito’s homework. Rosa and Carolina knew their skill sets and sought resources, teachers and administrators, to fill needed roles. Clearly, then, the mothers were deft learners who increasingly understood the rules of engagement at Jefferson School.

A separate case of parental advocacy, in fact, illustrated how a threat to family economic capital could encroach upon the cultivation of social and cultural capital. In this instance, Carolina’s eldest child, Soledad, the mother of pre-schooler Lydia, came to a Fundamental Spanish Literacy class one day to request help from Ernestina in dealing with the District, which had plans to send Lydia to a different grammar school next year for kindergarten. Soledad was upset. She had a job three days a week, so her mother walked Lydia to school for her. If the District would not allow Lydia to continue at Jefferson along with Juanito, then Soledad could be forced to quit her job as a housekeeper for a retired teacher in order to take Lydia to and from school.
Soledad had to pursue several steps in order to request that the District reconsider its decision. First, she inquired at Jefferson’s main office and was directed to Principal Serrano, who explained that the issue was out of his hands and that Soledad would need to go to the District office, about 3 miles from Jefferson. Soledad was able to get a ride to the office (she did not yet know how to drive at that point) only to find that, with her last name being different from Lydia’s, the District would not allow Soledad to fill out a petition or other paperwork in Lydia’s behalf. This meant that Soledad’s husband, Eduardo, who then earned an hourly wage at a winery where he worked Monday through Friday till 4:00 p.m., needed to get off work early in order to come to the District office, which closed daily at 4:00. It was at this point that Soledad came to a Spanish Literacy class in the hopes that la maestra Ernestina might have some pull with the District. Ernestina explained that she had no such pull but offered to help Soledad draft a letter to the District. Fortunately, however, this proved unnecessary, as Eduardo was able to arrange for the time off to go to the District and fill out a petition form. In the long run, however, the District denied the family’s petition. The following year, to deal with the situation, Carolina walked both children to school together up to a certain intersection, and from there Juanito, then a fourth-grader, had to walk the rest of the way to school on his own. During the summer following the fourth-grade for Juanito, the point became moot when the Sandoval family was evicted from their house, as its owner wanted to sell the property. The family moved just two blocks from Olympia school, also in the District, and so once again the children could be escorted to school together.

Interestingly, Soledad, like Rosa, took several steps and sought out multiple school officials in attempting to get help with their respective situations. Neither woman came away with a satisfactory resolution, yet both remained persistent in their attempts to seek improved situations for their children. It could be argued that Soledad’s pursuit was undertaken in behalf of family economics more than for Lydia’s education, but that would miss the point that, for the mothers in this study, family economic health (economic capital) and other forms of basic well-being were integral aspects of parent involvement, such that a loss in any one area could create a snowball effect in others. In this case, because the family combined its resources, residing in the same home and pooling finances to make their rent, Soledad’s loss of income could have affected the entire family. In addition, without his mother accompanying him all the way to school, Juanito’s safety could have been affected. As for issues of capital, now that Carolina was no longer present on the Jefferson campus 3 days a week, her opportunities for social networking (to develop social capital), which contributed to her development of cultural capital such as knowledge of the inner workings of Jefferson School, were likewise limited.

Interestingly, Rosa’s and Soledad’s persistence may be indicative of what much critical interpretive research (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) has reported only among middle class parents. As such, their cases confirm that conceptions of social class, like conceptions of parent involvement, are relative to their social context, i.e., their field of engagement (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1993; Bourdieu and

2 See fn. 4, Chapter 4. Although I have given families, including in-laws, a single last name for the sake of the reader’s understanding, mothers, in keeping with Mexican custom, usually kept their birth surnames and added their husband’s surname as a second one, only to drop it in the U.S., where it is customary to have only one last name.
With greater access to formal education in their native Mexico, as well as contacts here in the U.S., such as parent programs for Rosa, as well as the tutelage of her employer, a retired teacher, for Soledad, these women clearly had gained greater familiarity with the so-called “rules of the game” at a U.S. institution like Jefferson School. In contrast, recall how Carolina responded when Maribel, Carolina’s younger daughter and a newly arrived sophomore at South Valley High, was beaten up at school. Despite her motherly concern and incredulity, it was not Carolina who called the school to lodge a complaint, but rather Soledad. With Soledad’s eighth-grade education and facility with telephone use and conversational protocols, Soledad was much better equipped to handle such a call. It is important to reiterate here that the prescriptive literature’s contention that parents with more formal education are more involved in their children’s schooling (cf., Dauber and Epstein, 2001 [1995]; Hidalgo et al., 1995) is flawed, since it ignores various forms of parental involvement exercised collectively through family and other social networks. At the same time, this literature tends to overlook contributions essential to children’s academic success, such as Carolina’s provision of transportation and nutrition for the children, or Margarita’s provision of funds for books and tuition for her children in college.

It is similarly important to consider the challenges faced by parents who may be not only less formally educated, and thus less apprised of the “rules of the game,” but also less socially connected to people and programs that can help parents learn the ins and outs of parental advocacy. I would suggest that one such parent was Margarita before she began attending Spanish Literacy classes at Jefferson School. While Margarita was a loving, nurturing, and caring parent who wholeheartedly supported her children’s schooling, in the eyes of her eldest daughter, Eloisa, there was much that her newly immigrated, undereducated parents could not do. To qualify them as “uninvolved,” however, would miss the point. Margarita contributed much to her children’s education. At the same time, had she had access to Jefferson’s parent classes early on, had her children attended mostly the same schools, and had her children’s schools been accessible by local bus routes that someone could teach Margarita and her husband to maneuver, then perhaps things might have been more optimal for Eloisa and her siblings. Instead, Eloisa, completing her education at a four-year state college at age 30, remains puzzled by decisions that school officials made during her upbringing, and she wishes that her parents had had tools, opportunities to develop the cultural capital needed to question those decisions and to advocate for her at school.

Entering the U.S. as a third-grader, Eloisa recalled, in a taped interview in Spanish and English, how difficult that transition was. For one thing, she was made to repeat the third grade. She recalled that transferring to U.S. schools was something of a traumatic culture shock for her: she was bused far from home, so no one could come to get her even when an emergency arose. At the same time, she had been at the top of her class in Mexico, and in the U.S. felt like she understood nothing, even though she recalled being in a bilingual classroom. She had to learn a new set of institutional rules, she said, and her parents could not help her interpret them. Rather, it was she who acted as interpreter for them:

Eloisa: Y yo creo que era un poco…era un poco difícil adaptarse a la…a las nuevas…a las nuevas reglas y escuela…y…
Ali: ¿qué diferencias…?
Eloisa: diferencias que en México la escuela estaba al otro lado y no tenía que caminar mucho o agarrar un bus. También yo creo que, ah…la manera que los papás allá se pueden comunicar [en español] y acá no. Acá uno tenía que estar traduciendo [para los papás] lo que le dice la maestra.

Ali: ¿Recuerda algunos momentos en que pasaba eso?
Eloisa: Yo creo que, um, no recuerdo bien pero sí recuerdo que desafortunadamente no iban a las conferencias y una de las cosas [razones] que yo creo que no iban a las conferencias es porque obviamente no…no saben manejar vehículo.

Eloisa: And I think it was a little…it was a little difficult to adapt to the…to the new…to the new rules and school…and…
Ali: What differences?
Eloisa: differences [in] that in Mexico school was across the street and I didn’t have to walk a lot or take a bus. Also, I think that, ah, the way in which parents there can communicate [in Spanish] and here, no. Here one has to be translating [for one’s parents] what the teacher says.
Ali: Do you remember any instances in which that happened?
Eloisa: I think, um, I don’t remember well but I do remember that unfortunately they didn’t go to the conferences and one of the things [reasons] that I think that they didn’t go to conferences is because obviously they don’t…don’t know how to drive.

When I asked Eloisa why she had to interpret if her parents weren’t actually at school with her, she said that it was more a question of trying to make sense of her new school situation—gaining a feel for the game for herself and her parents: “Era [cuestión de] traducir tratando de entender al mismo tiempo” (It was [a question of] translating and trying to understand at the same time). Later, after repeating the third grade upon her arrival in the U.S., Eloisa was made to skip seventh grade but never learned precisely why. She recalled being told by school officials that because she had good grades, they were putting her in the eighth grade. Following junior high, Eloisa attended Greeley High School, was then transferred to Bradley High in the same district, and then finally dropped out and earned a general education diploma (GED) instead. Eloisa lamented that if her parents had understood how to communicate with her schools and advocate for her, they perhaps could have helped her navigate the murky waters of junior high and high school and prevented her forced transfer; then maybe she wouldn’t have dropped out of high school and would have finished college sooner. She summed it up in English:

I don’t think that they [my parents] don’t care. I don’t think that. I think it’s just because they don’t [and didn’t] understand the new [U.S. school] system.

I asked Eloisa how it was that she learned to negotiate a new educational system despite feeling left to her own devices, and she replied:

I think at that time…you know, it’s my view, since I’m always like the responsible person, you know, I have to set an example for my siblings, so I think that it’s just, you just go along. I mean, it’s like survival I guess in a way, so yeah.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to make sense of why Eloisa was first made to repeat a grade, then to skip one, then to transfer to a second high school. Her story may help to illuminate, however, some of the unseen forces faced by Latin@ high school and college students as they attempt to negotiate the school system and ultimately graduate.
(cf. Garcia, 2001). What is clear is that in Eloisa’s eyes, her parents could not advocate for her. Unlike middle class parents who themselves have usually attended grade school through college, Eloisa’s parents had not been bred in the system and had few if any opportunities to gain a feel for it. Eloisa’s sister Diana, in fact, explained that among her high school friends, the only one who bypassed community college and went straight to a four-year institution was the friend whose mother herself had attended college. All of Diana’s other peers first attended community college, because, like Diana, they unwittingly had failed to take all of the required classes to go directly to a four-year institution. One would think that professional school counselors, not parents, would be charged with understanding and communicating the ever-changing rules of college admissions, but increasingly, parents, even those with no access to such informational capital, have been saddled with the task. Again, had Margarita and her husband received some access to—or assistance in navigating—formal schooling, not to mention the local bus system, then things might have been different. On the other hand, as aptly argued by de Carvalho (2001), why should parents increasingly be charged with tasks traditionally assigned to schools? While Margarita and her husband could certainly have benefitted—and benefitted their children—from further information about their school system, its decisions, and later college entrance requirements and other forms of college knowledge, this does not remove the burden from the school to communicate with students as well as parents.

Fortunately, what Eloisa and Diana did learn from their parents were lessons of hard work and persistence. For, if Margarita could not act as a persistent parent advocate, she could indeed act as a persistent lifelong learner and resilient model parent. Eloisa was dismayed with herself for taking, as she saw it, so many years to complete her education, but like her mother, persistence paid off. Parental determination, an invaluable form of capital discussed below in detail, is undervalued in the prescriptive literature just as in the dominant U.S. society. For the moment, I turn from parent advocacy at school to the ways in which the parents volunteered both on the Jefferson campus and in their community, frequently using volunteering as a mode of networking, advocacy, and capital creation as well.

4. School and Community Volunteering and Related Forms of Participation

As enacted by the mothers, acts of volunteering in the school and community were completely intertwined. Geographically, the nearby youth center that housed many community meetings—whether for parents or youths—shared the same city block with Jefferson, so mothers simply migrated from a school involvement activity to a community one and vice versa. Jefferson Principal Julio Serrano fostered and touted many such school-community interrelationships, and in a similar vein, so did the mothers. Below I begin with perspectives on volunteering and proceed to views of community activism as parent involvement.

4.1 Volunteering: A Broadened Perspective

As noted in Chapter 5, focal mothers and other parents participated in a variety of volunteer activities. Many of these, such as lending support to school organizations, volunteering at school (in classrooms or on the broader campus), and accompanying children on field trips, are frequently cited in the prescriptive literature. Once again, however, the mothers discussed and enacted a broader range of activities under the heading of volun-
teering, additionally including activities of community support and activism that intertwined with activities of school support.

On the Jefferson campus itself, many parents participated in less traditionally recognized organizations or activities. For instance, it could be argued that the Migrants Program and Coffees with the Principal functioned at Jefferson more as a PTA or school site council might function at most middle class U.S. schools. Tellingly, all of the focal mothers with children at Jefferson reported participation in the Migrants Program, and those mothers whose schedules permitted—Alma, Helena, Lupe, and Rosa—also attended the Coffees with the Principal. In fact, many of those mothers (and indeed several non-focal mothers as well), continued to lend their time to Jefferson School or its neighborhood after the Tuesday morning coffees or Thursday morning literature circles. Sometimes mothers helped distribute bilingual newspapers to classrooms on behalf of the weekly newspaper distribution program. In addition, many mothers, after leaving the Tuesday coffees, went on to the community support organization Activas en la Comunidad, which met weekly at the youth center. Alma and Lupe, as well as several non-focal mothers, were especially active in this group.

Another form of less traditionally recognized volunteering on behalf of schools is lending one’s time and support in political activism to benefit education (Moreno and Valencía, 2002). In the spring of 2005, a time when education and health services had become especially politicized in California in the face of state funding cuts, many mothers, such as Carolina, Lupe, and Rosa, participated with their children in a political demonstration against the cuts. As it happened, several teacher, police, and firefighter union locals in the Silicon Valley had planned a protest outside a campaign fundraising event by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger at a local downtown hotel, and Ernestina had encouraged parents to join the many Jefferson teachers who would attend in support of public education. Later, in a follow-up discussion in a Spanish literacy class, Carolina referred to the Governor as “el Presidente” (the President), which indicated to me that she did not completely understand the political background involved. When I asked her why she’d attended the rally even if she hadn’t completely grasped such details, she responded vigorously, “Porque la maestra [Ernestina] me lo pidió” (Because la maestra [Ernestina] asked me to). Such was Carolina’s respect for la maestra in her plea to support education, that even without fully comprehending the politics involved, not to mention the many rally placards and protest slogans in English, Carolina got involved in order to support la maestra and other Jefferson teachers.

At the protest rally itself, attended by approximately 1,500 people, I noted, as identified by their placards, hundreds of off-duty police officers and firefighters as well as teachers, high school students, and many mothers with children in tow. Of the mothers with children with whom I came in contact, many, by their dress and speech, appeared to be Latina immigrants. Where were the middle class mothers (not to mention fathers) from the suburbs, I wondered. Perhaps their political activism had waned since the sixties, I surmised. Or perhaps their suburban school districts, like mine and others in the San Francisco Bay Area, would simply ask parents to respond to an S.O.S. (“Save Our Schools”) campaign with a check of several hundred dollars, to compensate with private

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3 A local newspaper reported attendance at the downtown rally by “around 1,500 people.”
4 Similarly, Juan Sandoval brought son Juanito to a political demonstration to support immigration reform.
economic capital what the state would take away. In contrast, during the previous spring, a separate group of Latin@ and African American parents staged a hunger strike, reminiscent of those of labor and civil rights activist César Chávez, on the capitol lawn in Sacramento.\(^5\) No such political demonstration on the part of suburban middle class parents, however, has been reported.

Broader depictions of parent involvement, then, including political activism and involvement in less recognized school and community organizations, can only lead to fuller understandings of the ways in which race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic class influence not *whether* parents participate but *how* they participate. Further studies are needed to correct unfounded depictions of working class and minority parents as “uninvolved” and to fully understand the ways in which such social and cultural factors shape perspectives and practices in parent involvement.

4.2 Volunteering at School: Normative Conceptions

Yet even as there were many instances of less recognized parent involvement, there were still instances in which the mothers’ participation followed even the most normative conceptions of participation, such as volunteering in the classroom and on field trips. Nearly all of the mothers reported escorting a child’s class on a field trip at one time or another, and four focal mothers served in the Club de Lectores. In addition, two mothers, Helena and Rosa, frequently volunteered in their children’s classrooms.

Both Helena and Rosa reported that they began as classroom volunteers when their children entered preschool. Before that time, they had no idea that parents might be admitted, let alone welcomed, in a U.S. classroom. Rosa decided to volunteer daily in daughter Kathy’s preschool class because, although she thought preschool would be good for Kathy, Rosa also thought it would be difficult for so young a child to be away from home:

> Y yo cuando le dije a Kathy “vas a ir a la escuela […]” yo no sabía que podía quedarme de voluntaria. En México no se puede quedar uno. Dije, “Te vas a ir a la escuela, te va a cuidar una maestra. Yo me voy a ir, sola te voy a dejar”. Yo decía, va a llorar mi niña pues estaba bien apegada a mí, pobrecita. Cuando llegué a la escuela, que empecé a ver que los papás se podían quedar. Entonces, yo me quedé como voluntaria y ella [Kathy] iba y me decía: “Ya vete. ¿No es que me ibas a dejar sola y es que la maestra me iba a cuidar? ¿Cuándo te vas a ir?” Y yo quedaba. A mí se me partía el corazón cuando me decía ella eso, porque yo decía si la dejo va a llorar, pobrecita. No, ella me corrió de, del salón. Pero de todos modos yo era bien terca, entonces yo quedaba de voluntaria. Pero cuando el día que yo me iba ella nunca lloró en la escuela.

\(^5\) A hunger strike originally undertaken by a nine activists in the East San Francisco Bay area who called themselves “Fast4 Education” was reported by several sources, some of which I accessed through the LexisNexis service on October 8, 2004, namely:

Bender, K. “Four Continue Education-Linked Fast.” The Argus (Fremont, CA).


And when I told Kathy, “you’re going to go to school,” I didn’t know that I could stay as a volunteer. In México one can’t stay [at school]. I said, “You’re going to go to school. A teacher is going to take care of you. I’m going to leave, I’m going to leave you alone.” I said, my daughter’s going to cry, since she was very attached to me, poor thing. When I arrived at the school, I began to see that the parents could stay. So, I stayed as a volunteer and she [Kathy] would come to me and say: “Get going. Weren’t you going to leave me alone and have the teacher take care of me? When are you leaving?” And I stayed. My heart broke in two when she would say that, because I said if I leave her she’s going to cry, poor thing. No, she ran me out of, of the room. But in any case I was quite stubborn, so I stayed as a volunteer. But when the day came that I left, she never cried in school.

Helena and Rosa also both regularly volunteered at Jefferson’s “student store,” where children exchanged tickets, earned in class for good behavior, for school supplies and children’s paperback books. In fact, this participation echoed Rosa’s schooling in Mexico, where Rosa recalled that she and the other children were required to provide janitorial maintenance and sell food items in the school store in exchange, in part, for the privilege of attending school (see Chapter 5). While she believed that this was no longer the practice at her school in Mexico, she was happy to help in Jefferson’s student store, not because it directly benefitted her children, but because, Rosa said, it set a good example for them and helped support the school in its program to emphasize good behavior.

But the mothers also participated in programs of more direct, mutual benefit for themselves and, at times, their children, such as the Club de Lectores. Alma, Helena, Lupe, and Rosa all volunteered regularly for the Club de Lectores. For Alma, even though her youngest son, a fifth-grader named Jorge, was not tagged as a low-scoring reader and therefore did not participate in the Club, she, like Rosa, felt that her participation set a good example for her children. At the same time, Alma drew a great sense of accomplishment and pride from her participation in the program, saying: “Me sentí como si fuera una verdadera maestra” (I felt as if I were a real teacher).

But mothers like Rosa and Alma had only two school-aged children. For other mothers, such as Helena and Lupe, volunteering and other forms of participation often became a juggling act, irrespective of mothers’ work schedules. Helena, for instance, did not work outside the home still but had to contend with her middle child’s hurt feelings in juggling her various volunteer activities. Alicia, Helena’s first-grader, had been crying a lot at school, complaining that her mother volunteered much more in her little sister Alejandra’s preschool classroom and not in Alicia’s first grade classroom. At that point, Helena thought it was more appropriate for her to be in her youngest child’s classroom, and that her first grader should toughen up. She was afraid that Alicia would become too dependent on having mami in the classroom. Helena explained to Alicia that she helped in ways that the daughter didn’t notice. For instance, in addition to serving as a Migrant Program officer and District parent representative, Helena attended and often acted as a group facilitator at literacy circles. She also helped teachers directly, collating and stapling packets of materials—to the point where her back hurt—and making construction paper cut-outs at home to be used by the children for art projects in school. She baked cookies to be decorated for the holidays, acted as a chaperone for field trips, and read to children in small groups in the classroom. As for monitoring Alicia’s progress personally, Helena spoke to her daughter’s teacher and found out that Alicia, in her teacher’s estima-
tion, was academically advanced for the first grade but emotionally unprepared for the second grade. The teacher questioned Helena as to whether she was pushing her daughter, and Helena said indeed no: Alicia was already reading to Helena in English, which her eldest, third-grader Beti, hadn’t done at that age. Helena explained to the teacher that Alicia was simply self-motivated. In fact, it could be argued that Alicia was not at all emotionally unprepared, but rather astutely angling for more of her mother’s attention. In sum, Helena, in agreement with her husband that she should not work outside the home, instead had become a de facto full-time “professional” volunteer. On the one hand, she had received public recognition at both the school and state levels for her dedication and leadership. On the other hand, even her own child failed to recognize the extent of her mother’s efforts. Alicia’s narrow focus, of course, centered around her own needs. Margarita’s daughter Eloisa’s perspective may also have been limited along such lines. This theme of limited perspectives—whether narrowed by factors of a societal, cultural, political, local, or individual nature—is a theme to which I will return in the next chapter, on home-school relations. For the time being, however, note that similarly to Lupe, exhausted from attending meetings and volunteering at her children’s three schools while weaving this participation in and out of her work schedule, so, too, was Helena pulled in various directions even though all of her children attended a single school, and Helena did not otherwise work outside the home.

4.3 A Community Support Group: *Las Activas*

Despite many demands on their time, the mothers engaged in a variety of involvement activities that included work to support education not only at school but also in the community. Alma Rivera, for instance, was employed by the County as a home-health counselor to educate new mothers on the importance of breastfeeding. She let no moss grow under her feet, participating in a variety of unremunerated community activities offered at the local youth center as well. On Tuesday mornings, Alma and several other mothers met as part of *Activas en la Comunidad*, also known as “Las Activas,” a community support group sponsored by a local immigrant rights organization. It was through this group that Alma became acquainted with several civic leaders and urged them to support programs to help parents. In her own words:

> Que he tenido la oportunidad de estar cerca de ellos [lideres de la escuela, la comunidad y del estado] yo les encargo mucho a los padres. Digo, ¿quieren hijos…quieren, quieren estudiantes que lleguen a la universidad? ¿Quieren alumnos bien preparados? ¿Quieren reducir las pandillas? Primero váyanse con los padres.

I’ve had the opportunity to be close to them [school, community, and state leaders] and I promote the cause of parents. I say, do you want children…do you want, want students who make it to college? Do you want students who are well educated? Do you want to reduce gangs? First, get with the parents.

In fact, for Alma, learning was of little value if it wasn’t employed in the service of others:

> Que nosotros tenemos que…que…este aprender lo más que puedamos y eso lo…hay que llevarlo más adelante. Porque no es, no, no e…de nada te va a servir de que

It’s that we have to…to…um learn as much as we can and take that…that forward. Because it’s not, it’s not, it’s not…what good is it to you to get a degree, for instance, you want to be a doctor. OK. You study to be a doctor. You really apply yourself. You received your medical degree and, what are you going to be? Are you going to keep your diploma in a cabinet and there you’ll remain? Well, what good did all that sacrifice do you? And what good does it do you to have many patients if you don’t want to see them? Right? It’s all about learning and teaching. Because that is our life: learning and teaching.

4.4 Community Events: Immigrants Day, a Case of Political and Educational Advocacy

A special event in which Las Activas participated in the spring of 2005 was Immigrants Day at the Sacramento capitol building. There was a good deal of preparation for this event. For example, a representative of Las Activas’ sponsoring organization spoke at a planning meeting before the event. When she arrived, she asked the women what they hoped to gain by participating in Immigrants Day. “Quiero apoyar a la comunidad” (I want to support the community), said Lupe. Alma emphasized the need to prepare youth for college. The guest speaker, a young Latina, then gave a presentation to the women in Spanish about the U.S. system of government, focusing on the California state government. Using a flip chart to diagram the state’s representative system of government, she showed us photos with names of our local state senators and assemblypersons, and gave details about their party affiliations, political stances, and positions on new legislation that could affect immigrants. She explained that las Activas already had an appointment to meet with two local Latino assemblymen, Alberto Torrico and Joe Coto, but that our local senator, Abel Maldonado, had not yet confirmed an appointment. As the more than 30 parents (mostly mothers, some with toddlers in tow) gathered to listen, the speaker explained how a bill becomes law. She then discussed Assembly Bill 930, which would provide funds to give immigrants greater access to information on naturalization.

When Immigrants Day arrived a week later, several women gathered, some with their children, in front of Jefferson School to meet a chartered bus provided by the sponsoring organization. Pink promotional T-shirts were handed out; they read “Activas en la Comunidad: Salud y bienestar” (Women Active in the Community: Health and Well-being). We shared the bus with a group of Eastern European immigrants who had boarded before us and sat at the front. I sat with Lupe, who brought her oldest child, Elda, along with her. Lupe’s dear friend, Beatriz, also sat nearby with her three daughters, the youngest of which, a third-grader, composed and solved math equations with three-digit numbers to help pass the two-hour bus ride. (Beatriz, recall from Chapter 5, did not read or write, yet she was an active participant in the morning Literature Circles and Coffees with the Principal.) When the bus arrived, before we disembarked, a coordinator assigned different groups of participants to appointments that afternoon with different senators and assemblymembers.
After spilling out of our bus onto the capitol lawn, we sat in folding chairs arranged in front. We listened to several state legislators and community leaders give speeches, expressing their belief in the contributions of immigrants and their interest in helping immigrants gain rights and citizenship. In the afternoon, I gave Lupe and Elda a tour of the capitol before our scheduled appointment:

*We went to the Senate chamber, and Lupe was fascinated to see a vote being taken. The session adjourned, so we went to the Assembly chamber, where we could see Assemblymen Alberto Torrico and Hector de la Torre, as well as the assemblyman we had an appointment with, Ira Ruskin. De la Torre was arguing for a bill that would provide greater rights and protections to farmworkers and garment workers. The bill would require that these workers receive paid breaks.* (Fieldnote excerpt, 5/23/2005)

We then left the Assembly in order to make it to our appointment at Assemblyman Ruskin’s office. However, as the debate of the aforementioned bill continued, Assemblyman Ruskin remained in the chamber, and Lupe, Elda, and I met with his top aide:

*He asked Lupe what her concerns were, and, with me acting as interpreter, she said that she worried that there were too few opportunities for youth in our area, and that she feared that too many were getting involved in gangs. She worried that there were not enough programs to get kids into college and help pay for it. She expressed her concern particularly for the needs of youth, especially in terms of opportunities and their educational dreams. Elda reinforced these points. She reported that at her high school, dedicated to preparing and getting disadvantaged kids into college, 52 of 54 seniors there last year went on to 4-year institutions. Her school is a public charter school helped largely by private funds, she said, and she lamented that there weren’t more public funds given to the school.* (Fieldnote excerpt, 5/23/2005)

Soon after expressing their concerns, a much larger group arrived for the appointment. We hadn’t realized there would be others, and so our time was up. But during their brief “day in court”—or more precisely, their moment in the Assemblyman’s chambers—Lupe and Elda spoke globally in behalf of others, of their community and their school, and of opportunities for youth. In that moment when they had the ear of someone linked to someone else in power, they echoed the theme that Alma, Helena, and Rosa—in fact of all the mothers—had so forcefully expressed or enacted, of service to others.

5. Literacy Support at Home

Because literacy support at home was reviewed extensively in Chapter 5, I pause here only briefly to emphasize that, in terms of parent involvement, families organically created their own literacy networks. Within these networks, parents supported literacy development in the home in a variety of ways, regardless of their status as print literate or limited-print literate. Additionally, participation in parent programs increased parents’ contact with print and supported their literacy practices. In fact, in addition to the contact with print inside parent classrooms, Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo frequently lent
and gave books for parents to read (or be read to) at home, and scheduled regular tours at the school library and local city library, the \textit{biblioteca}, with its extensive collection of books in Spanish. As such, the school, through parent classes and other supportive practices, encouraged the family literacy network, helping to extend it, through, and beyond the school.

Numeracy, too, it should be noted, also received home support. As one example, using math games and songs, Rosa taught daughter Kathy multiplication tables before Kathy had even started first grade. This came about because Kathy’s kindergarten teacher had expressed concern that Kathy hadn’t learned to count by tens to 100. Before long, Rosa was teaching Kathy not only to count by tens, but also by fives, and then twos, etc., so that Kathy learned multiplication by singing about it while walking to school with her mother. Rosa also taught Kathy how to do division before it appeared in the curriculum in the third grade. As another example, recall that it was Eloisa who taught her mother to use a telephone, including the concepts of counting, something Margarita did with great facility in both Spanish and English. Numeracy skills, then, like print literacy, were not imparted in a merely unidirectional fashion from parent to child; children, too, shared knowledge with their parents.

6. Material support

As noted in the previous chapter, many parents provided educational materials, such as books, notebooks, and pencils to their children. Margarita, for example, contributed regularly to her daughters’ book and tuition costs, and the Sandovals provided a desktop computer and writing materials for the entire family.

But if books, notebooks, a computer, and a quiet place to study are considered basic provisions for children in middle class families, the families in this study tended to focus on more fundamental necessities. Use of books, computers, and study carrels could be—and were—obtained at the library, but adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, and transportation were at times less easy to come by. As many focal mothers expressed repeatedly, they saw it as their job to provide such basics for their children. In this way, they said, they helped prepare their children for school. As we shall see in the subsequent section, families sometimes faced seemingly overwhelming odds, as deprivation in one area could lead to still more scarcity in another. But if families at times lacked even life’s most basic necessities, they possessed determination in immeasurable abundance.

6.1 Food, Clothing, Shelter, and Health Care…in Good Times and Bad

The mothers in this study first and foremost placed a good deal of emphasis on good health, hygiene, and nutrition for their families. Pondering her own childhood, Carolina Sandoval blamed inadequate nutrition and arduous physical labor (one of her chores was to lug heavy buckets of water from a well at some distance from the family home) for what she viewed as her stunted growth: Carolina was less than 5 feet tall. She was not about to let that happen to her own children and grandchildren, she said. Thus, Carolina masterfully tended to the nutritional needs of the entire family, preparing three meals a day, including fresh fruit, home-cooked legumes and other vegetables, home-made corn tortillas, and fish and poultry when possible. On Mondays and Wednesdays, she completed much of the preparation in advance to allow herself time to attend the basic Spanish literacy classes at Jefferson.
But provision of adequate nutrition was not always seamless for mothers in this study. During one taped interview, Lupe sobbed as she explained how her and her husband’s respective work injuries, as well as work stoppages for inclement weather at her husband’s construction job, had left the family destitute:

[…] ahora que a mí me pasó eso [una lesión a la espalda], viera maestra qué difícil, tanto para mis hijas como para mí, eso es muy duro [llorando] y yo les digo…ustedes miraran aquí, la gente como comía antes, les digo, nosotros tenemos todo…no nos hace falta nada. Mira Diosito nos da. Y este…pues [ dicen] no mamá, no te preocupes que a nosotros pues ahí con mis hermanos que les da […] Maestra, no son niños exigentes que digan…pues, que yo quiero verdad. Ellos no, entienden que ahorita no podemos darles nada, le digo. Vayan a la escuela, cumplan con la escuela, es lo único que tienen que darle porque ahorita estamos prácticamente muy, muy mal económicamente.

[…] now that this happened to me [a back injury], you see, maestra, how difficult [it’s been] as much for my daughters as for me, that’s been very hard [crying] and I tell them, look here, you all, how well people [we] would eat before, I [would] tell them, we have everything…we lack nothing. Look, God provides. And well…well…[they say] no Mom, don’t worry about it, we’ll be ok, take care of our siblings […]. Maestra, they’re not demanding children who say, I really want [this]. They, no, they understand that right now we can’t give them anything, I tell you. Go to school, fulfill your school duties, that’s all they have to do, because right now for all intents and purposes we’re very, very bad off economically.

Lupe had never been one to eschew work, but her debilitating back injury left her jobless for several months. Coupled with her husband’s foot injury and periodic construction work stoppages, the family barely made it through the winter and spring of 2005. Later, in February of 2006, things got worse when the family was suddenly evicted. Because, as it happened, their upper-story apartment at the back of an old house did not have a city permit, the family was given only one day’s notice to leave. They dealt with the eviction by splitting up into pairs—Lupe with little Sophie, Diego with Benjamin, and the two eldest daughters, Elda and Paloma, together—each pair taking lodging separately with different relatives for a couple of weeks at a time, as Lupe fortunately had a large extended family living in the Valley. Elda and Paloma also stayed with one of their SVC Prep teachers for two weeks. Thanks to this safety net, the Machado children missed little school during the six-week period that they remained homeless before finding a two-bedroom apartment about 20 blocks from their previous home. Indeed, in the above interview excerpt, note how Lupe closes with an emphasis on the import of schooling amidst economic hardship.

But Sophie Machado, then in first grade, suffered an acute, oozing ear infection during the family’s period of homelessness. In order to look after her child’s health needs, Lupe, back at work at that point, requested occasional breaks to take Sophie to appointments at a the local free medical clinic. Despite the necessary prior approval she obtained, Lupe was later threatened with firing for taking the time off.

In short, a mother’s time off work due to injury affected the family’s economic vitality and nutrition, and later, a sudden eviction led to an acute health problem in her child, that once again, threatened the mother’s job and the family’s economic vitality.
Some families in this study at times walked a precarious tightrope. As previously noted, two of the three focal families, the Sandovalas as well as the Machados, were evicted during the time of this study. In addition, Helena Contreras reported that her family had suffered an eviction a few years before the study began.

6.2 Continuously Looking after Children’s Health

Fortunately, Lupe was eventually able to obtain for Sophie the ear operation needed to heal the infection. Sophie, in fact, was not the only child in this study to suffer a serious illness. Rosa’s daughter, Kathy, suffered from colitis. The subject came up in class one day as Rosa and I were reading a health-related book together in a group with three other mothers.

*Rosa’s daughter: Rosa knew much about the subject of this book, because, as she explained, her daughter has had colitis since she was a small child. When I asked Rosa how she realized that her daughter was ill, she said she noticed it when Kathy had infrequent bowel movements and complained of stomachaches. Rosa then recited the foods her daughter can’t eat and explained in detail what colitis is and how it works.* (Fieldnote excerpt, 3/2/2005)

A mediocre biology student myself, I could not recall the many details that Rosa relayed with ease, only my impression that this woman, supposedly undereducated by U.S. standards, was both keenly aware of her daughter’s condition and likewise well educated about it. The mothers, in short, were careful, effective guardians of their children’s health, hygiene, nutrition, and general welfare, even with limited resources. Moreover, they saw such activities, indeed, the activity of mothering itself in all its myriad aspects, as the most fundamental element of parent involvement.

6.3 Transportation

As the mothers saw it, in fact, getting a child to school was yet another fundamental aspect of parent involvement:

Ali: ¿Qué piensa usted que debe hacer una mamá o un padre para preparar a un hijo para la escuela aquí?
Carolina: ¿Qué puede hacer?
Ali: O ¿qué debe hacer?
Carolina: Pues…que [el hijo] no pierda la escuela, que a diario pues se venga a la escuela y que le eche ganas a estudiar. Esto me imagino pues.

Ali: What do you think a mom or parent must do to prepare a child for school?
Carolina: What can [the parent] do?
Ali: Or what should the parent do?
Caro: Well, [see to it] that the child does not miss school, that s/he comes daily to school, and that s/he applies him/herself. That, I would imagine.

Carolina’s assertion makes good sense: arriving at school on time daily is arguably the single most basic necessity for a child’s success in school. From a U.S. middle class perspective, however, this may seem as though it should go without saying. Still, for many,
transportation represented a frequent and sometimes daunting challenge. Even though city buses seemed abundant in the downtown area, parents such as Margarita who did not read had no idea which bus to take without initial training or assistance from others. Likewise, those who frequently walked, like Carolina, could end up traveling back and forth for several miles a day, or be forced to choose which child to accompany to school as children were transferred or graduated to middle or high school. Parents also faced difficulties in getting themselves to and from classes, even to the extreme that one focal mother, Mercedes, was actually hit by a passenger truck when walking home after a parent class one night (Chapter 4).

Additionally, in a class discussion on bus transportation with officials from the local transportation authority, parents reported further difficulties and dangers. Lupe expressed incredulity that she’d witnessed a young man get beat up on a bus while the driver ignored her pleas for help. And parents complained that the cost of transportation was especially prohibitive, including the cost of monthly passes. In fact, it was common for bus drivers to seize the costly passes from undocumented youths who couldn’t prove their identity, said Lupe, and the transportation officials with whom we met did not deny it. Lupe once even spent the night in front of a local church to get in line for a lottery that would dispense these expensive passes. In short, transportation, like other provisions that middle class parents take for granted, presented a consistent challenge for many parents in the study. Yet with impeccable uniformity, they saw to it that their children got to school on time, whether on foot, by bus, or car if one was available.

6.4 Enrichment Opportunities

With much needed emphasis on the fundamentals of their children’s welfare, it may seem odd that the mothers even stopped to consider enrichment opportunities and related programs for their children, but they did. Parents were frequently made aware of enrichment programs through announcements at parent classes and migrant meetings, and through interactions with teachers.

Summer programs were very popular. Many mothers regularly brought their children to the library for summer reading programs. Still others, from the recently arrived Carolina Sandoval to the well-heeled Helena Contreras, enrolled their children in summer school. Juanito Sandoval, in fact, often spoke with fondness of the summer school field trips he’d taken to the Spanish mission at San Juan Bautista as well as to the NASA-Ames Research Center. One summer, however, Helena Contreras didn’t enroll her three daughters in summer school, as the family would be taking a trip to Mexico. The opportunity for her children to meet their grandparents, to contrast two cultures, and to see ranch animals from dogs to doves to rabbits, made the trip an enrichment activity in and of itself, said Helena.

Many parents also enrolled their children in afterschool homework clubs and recreation programs, but Carolina Sandoval, when she first arrived in the U.S., declined to enroll Juanito in an afterschool homework help program. Carolina was surprised and dismayed to learn that, if Juanito stayed with the homework program after school, he wouldn’t get home until after dark. This must have seemed strange indeed, since in Mexico, families traditionally enjoy their largest meal together in the afternoon and not after dark. Still, after a year in the U.S., Carolina relented to Juanito’s prodding and decided that the homework help was worth the trouble. Other afterschool groups and programs,
such as the Mexican folkloric dance troupe, mariachi music group, and soccer teams, were also quite popular. Lupe Machado, a trained seamstress, created costumes for the dancers, and Sophie danced with the group. Once again, however, transportation could pose a difficulty: after this study formally ended and Juanito Sandoval, an avid soccer player, began middle school, he was unable to join the school soccer team, as the school bus, his only transportation home, was available only immediately after school.

Note that the types of enrichment activities engaged in by the focal families and others do not constitute a mirror image of oft-cited activities in the prescriptive literature, such as “ballet, swimming, and French lessons” (Snow and colleagues, 1991:62, see Chapter 2). While such activities may reflect the tastes of the U.S. middle class, they hold no greater intrinsic value than the enrichment activities of the children in this study (cf., Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron, 2002 [1977]; Lareau, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001). Linguistically speaking, as native speakers of Spanish raised in the U.S., the children already possessed a much more precious gift than mere “French lessons” could provide: many children were natural bilinguals, and the more recently arrived held the promise of their developing bilingualism. Available music, dance, and recreational opportunities, though more culturally Mexican in orientation, were of course no less valuable to the children’s enrichment than the more French-oriented activities cited by Snow and her colleagues (1991), and parents seized such opportunities for their children with great enthusiasm. In fact, in light of the educational value of connections to their cultural roots (cf. Garcia, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996) such activities represented appropriate forms of cultural capital for the children.

7. Moral support

The material support outlined above, from the fundamental to the supplemental, was complemented in kind by a great deal of moral support. As indicated by Carolina above, in addition to getting her children to school on time, she likewise expected them to fully apply themselves to the endeavor, echándole ganas, as it were, giving it their best efforts.

7.1 Echándole ganas

In truth, the phrase echándole ganas is not easily translated into English. The verb echar literally means to ‘throw’ or ‘cast’, and ganas implies intense motivation, so that the phrase evokes a sense of powerful efforts of mind, body, and spirit acting in unison. The mothers themselves frequently used the phrase, or some variation thereof, in expressing their academic expectations of their children. At the same time, the mothers said they enacted their expectations in a variety of ways: making sure that children completed their homework, reminding children that applying themselves in school was their (the children’s) most important responsibility, and likewise reminding them that they should appreciate the opportunity to go to school. Like Carolina, Lupe, too, spoke of the motivation that a mother must instill in her children. A key ingredient there was to remind children how lucky they were to have the privilege of going to school.

Ali: ¿Me puede decir qué piensa usted que una mamá ah... debe hacer para sus hijos con respecto a la escuela?
Lupe: Ah… pues motivarlos, maestra, decirles que… más que nada contarles sus experiencias de uno… para que ellos empiecen a entender y a darle valor a la, a la vida,
¿verdad? A darle valor a la vida y a lo que tienen. Que sepan valorizar lo que tienen. Que tengan esa oportunidad de, de ir a la escuela que uno hubiera querido. Yo hubiera querido que por lo menos una semana me hubiera dicho mi mamá, ‘Vamos a la escuela, te llevo. Vamos a la escuela, te acompaño’. No… [mi mamá me decía] si quieres ir, tienes que hacer esto y esto [refiriéndose a los quehaceres domésticos]…si quieres ir. Pero no, [hoy en día] le dan [a uno] las opciones […].
Ali: Una cosa que noto…pero su mamá ahora sí la acompaña [ahora, a las clases de español básico].
Lupe: ¡Sí! [con énfasis] Sí, ahora sí, ahora sí, oh, sí [con risa].

Ali: Can you tell me what you think a mom um…should do for her children with respect to school?
Lupe: Uh…well motivate them, maestra, tell them that…more than anything else recount for them one’s experiences …so that they begin to understand and value life, don’t you think? To value life and what they have. They should value what they have. Because they have that opportunity to, to go to school that one would have liked to have. I would have liked it if just one week my mom would have said, ‘Let’s go to school, I’ll take you. Let’s go to school, I’ll go with you. No…[my mom told me] if you want to go, you have to do this and this [referring to household chores]…if you want to go. But no, [nowadays] one has options […].
Ali: One thing I notice…but your mom does go with you [now, to Basic Spanish Literacy classes].
Lupe: Yes! [with emphasis] Yes, now yes, now yes, oh, yes [laughing].

Lupe’s family, then, practiced what it preached. Perhaps economic conditions and opportunities had not allowed Lupe’s mother to accompany her children to school decades ago in Mexico, but now that the opportunity for schooling presented itself to both women, not only Lupe, but also her mother accompanying her, attended parent classes. Thus, they not only expected their children to appreciate the opportunity to go to school, but they modeled this appreciation themselves, and in multigenerational fashion.
Margarita, too, echoed Lupe’s and Carolina’s feelings about motivating children:

Ali: Y, ¿qué piensa usted que debe hacer una mamá para ayudar a sus hijos?
Margarita: Ay, pues, una mamá hace mucho por los hijos…uno quiere estar sobre ellos que estudienn.
Ali: ¿Qué hace la mamá?
Margarita: Apoyarlos.
Ali: Y, ¿cómo apoyarlos?
Margarita: Darles consejos, que se tienen que ir a la escuela, que tienen que hacer sus tareas y todo.

Ali: And what do you think a mom should do to help her children?
Margarita: Oh, well, a mother does a lot for her children…one has to be on top of them to make them study.
Ali: What does the mother do?
Margarita: Support them.
Ali: And support them how?
Margarita: Giving them advice, that they have to go to school, that they have to do their homework and everything.
Oldest daughter Eloisa may have recalled differently from Margarita the details of her parents’ attendance at parent-teacher conferences, but she nevertheless recalled feeling encouraged by the pride her parents expressed in her school accomplishments. Although, again, Eloisa’s parents could not read or write, they could—and did—motivate their children to succeed in school.

Mothers were also conscious of having to motivate children in different ways, according to each child’s personality. Lupe, for example, spoke of having to put extra pressure on her son:

Ali: Y, ¿qué tal su hijo?
Lupe: Él es más flojito, maestra. Tengo que estar con él todos los días: “¿Ya hiciste la tarea? ¿Ya hiciste la tarea? ¿Ya hiciste la tarea? ¿Ya la hiciste?”

Ali: And how about your son?
Lupe: He’s lazier, maestra. I have to stay on top of him every day: “Did you do your homework yet? Did you do your homework yet? Did you do it yet?”

As seen in Valdés (2003), then, mothers perceived differences in their children and responded to them accordingly, in some cases, expecting them to perform needed literacy tasks, while with others constantly pushing them to stay on top of their homework.


Such forms of motivation and encouragement, tailored to children’s individual needs, went hand in hand with more global forms of moral support. Parents frequently spoke of giving their children what they themselves did not have and frequently reminded children of how lucky they were to have the opportunity to get an education. Thus, to construct some parents as less concerned about education because of parents’ limited access to it completely opposes the data here. Parents may not always have been able to support their children in the precise ways stipulated by the prescriptive literature, but their varied acts of support demonstrated how highly they valued what they saw as an exceptional opportunity for their children.

Thus, although a novice reader and writer herself, Carolina provided her children and grandchild with what had prevented her from going to school—transportation—and likewise saw to it that the children enjoyed excellent nutrition, similarly scarce in her own childhood. Likewise, her husband, Juan, had attended the first grade as a thirteen-year-old and had to make his one pencil last the entire year, but he saw to it that his children and grandchildren had pens, pencils, and notebooks, and ultimately a desktop computer.

Margarita Garlarza evoked similar efforts on behalf of her children. Like Carolina, she was a novice reader and writer, but as noted, she worked seven days a week, which helped the family purchase a home. As such, the Galarzas were able to avoid the evictions, resultant school transfers, and general instability suffered by other focal families who rented their homes. She and her husband had also worked separate shifts over the

6 Recall, however, that the Galarza children fell prey to many school transfers due to busing and other decisions effected by school officials and apparently without parental consultation.
years, so that a parent would always be home when the children got home from school. When I asked Margarita to characterize what she had done to support her children’s education, she used the word “sacrifice” to describe it:

No, pues fíjese que mucho sacrificio. Para cuando tú tienes tu hijo o tu hija ya que entran en el colegio [comunitario] se hace muy difícil porque en veces que no tienes dinero para pagarle y tienes que ayudarlos si ellos están muy interesados en estudiar, pues tú tienes que apoyarlos lo más que puedas.

Yo soy una persona que los ayuda con lo que puedo y si no, pues, tengo que hacer de ver de limitarme de ya no gastar o de no tener otras cosas que gastar para darle a mi hija o a mi hijo.

Trabajar e ir ahorrando tu dinero lo más que puedas y no comprarte otras cosas que si las necesitas dejar eso que tienes que…ayudarle [a su hijo o hija] a pagar sus cuentas [universitarias].

Oh, well, you know, so much sacrifice. So when you have your son or your daughter entering [community] college it gets very difficult because at times you don’t have money to give him or her, and you have to help them if they are so interested in [their] studies; you have to support them as much as you can.

I’m a person who helps them in what I can and if not, well, I have to limit myself and not spend [money], or not have things or spend [money] so that I can give [it] to my daughter or my son.

To work and save your money as much as you can and not buy other things; so that if you need [things], set that aside, because you have to help [your son or daughter] to pay her/his [college] bills.

Margarita gave not only her money but also her time. During a period when she wasn’t working seven days a week, when her second daughter was working on an associate’s degree in accounting, Margarita had Mondays off, and so she spent Mondays providing childcare for her daughter’s child while the daughter went to class. Margarita also paid for her daughter’s books, to the tune of $400, and then gave her $50 a month to help her pay her student loan.

In fact, like Margarita, all of the mothers and their spouses modeled for their children an admirable work ethic, as well as persistence and resilience, and they frequently noted the importance of setting a good example for their children. As in López’ (2001) study of a migrant family, many parents in this study brought their children to work on weekends or school holidays. Where middle class children might enjoy a winter break on the ski slopes, Juanito Sandoval spent his days of vacation laying bricks alongside his father. And Eloisa Galarza recalled going to housecleaning jobs on weekends with her mother. Evoking with humor a central message in the López study, Carolina joked that bricklaying was a huge educational motivator for Juanito, who would much rather go to school than lay bricks all day long. Eloisa, too, conceded that, while it would’ve been nice to stay home and enjoy cartoons on Saturday mornings, she couldn’t help but admire her mother’s work ethic.
For the mothers, in short, parent involvement was not constituted by a prescriptivist list of discrete steps to be followed, but rather by a comprehensive orientation of doing all that one could for one’s children and providing an exemplary, forthright, hardworking role model for their children. The mothers’ global view of parent involvement, deeply enmeshed with parenting itself, was in fact echoed in a comment made by Lupe Machado, who viewed the act of immigration itself as her most important contribution to her children and their future. While some might judge Lupe’s unpermitted immigration as an illegal, or illegitimate act, for Lupe, coming to the U.S. with daughters Elda and Paloma, then a toddler and an infant respectively, was her most courageous and significant act of parenting:

Pues yo pienso que hice bien en…en traerme a mis hijas para acá [a los Estados Unidos]. Porque pues yo en… en México era madre soltera y tuve que…no tuve otra iniciativa más que nada y este…y yo quise buscar un mejor porvenir para mis hijas. Porque yo desde que…las tuve dije, “Es mi responsabilidad…es mi…no cuentan con nadie más, más que con su mamá”, entonces dije adonde vaya, van a ir ellas. […] Y tuve que enfrentar muchas, muchas cosas tanto pues muchas cosas de…ah…como nosotros los latinos ah…mucha habladuría de la gente. Entonces dije no, no, tengo que hacer yo algo por…por ellas. Eh…es una de las cosas que yo les digo a ellas y platico con ellas y les digo…en eso me considero yo no una mamá modelo pero tampoco les digo no estamos tan tiradas así en la calle les digo yo a ellas. Entonces eh…yo empecé a trabajar en el campo…aquí en [el Valle de Silicio] pizcando calabazas, pepino o muchas verduras. Trabajé por dos años ahí, tres años. Y este terminó la temporada y mi papá pues…lo bueno es que yo tuve el apoyo de mi papá, que él siempre me apoyó.

Well, I think I did well in…in bringing my daughters here [to the United States]. Because, well, I, in…in Mexico I was a single mother and I had to…I had no other opportunity really and um…I wanted to seek a better future for my daughters. Because I…since I had them I said, “It’s my responsibility…it’s my…they have no one else they can count on, other than their mother,” so I said wherever I go, they’re going to go. […] And I had to confront many, many things, many things like well many things um…like that we Latinos um…a lot of gossip from people. So I said no, no, I have to do something for…for them. Um…it’s one of the things that I tell them and chat with them about…in that I don’t consider myself a model mother but nor are we cast out into the street, I tell them. So…I began to work in the field…here in [the Silicon Valley] picking pumpkins, peppers, or other vegetables. I worked for two years there, three years. And then the season ended and my dad, well…the good thing is that I had the support of my dad, as he always supported me.

Lupe, then, finding herself a single mother with two small children and very little means, came to the U.S. not only to work in the fields and provide for her children, but also to give them a better future. As she humbly explained to me in the interview above, she didn’t consider herself a model parent in that she had had two children out of wedlock and was the target of wagging tongues. On the other hand, however, she took the responsibility of parenting head on, both morally and financially. She had the support of her father and in turn extended that to her children. Likewise, as she notes in the excerpt below, in seeking a husband, Lupe first looked for someone who would be a good father for Elda and Paloma. As she recounted to me, during their courtship Lupe told Diego:
Sobre todo pues yo le dije yo lo que quiero es un padre para mis hijas porque hombres hay muchos, entonces…papás no es tan fácil. Y pues así seguimos…ahorita tenemos [Diego y yo] trece años juntos. Sí. Y mis hijas pues ellas lo, lo ven como su padre, como su padre porque él las ha criado. Ellas no saben nada de…sí saben que él [Diego] no es su papá pero ellas viven felices así y pues aquí estamos, luchando con ellas con el…la escuela, escuela, escuela, porque yo les digo…es la única manera que tienen ellas para salir adelante. Les digo luego van a estar como yo ya [si no se dedican a la escuela] de que ya no puedo hacer tanto como hacía antes […]. Pero pues es…le pido a Dios que me dé licencia y fuerzas de, de verlas ser alguien y, y que estudien.

Above all, well, I told him what I want is a father for my daughters, because there are plenty of men out there, but…fathers, that’s not so easy. Yes. And so we’ve stayed together…now we’ve been [Diego and I] together for thirteen years. And my daughters well they see him, him as their father, as their father because he’s raised them. They don’t know anything of…yes, they know that he [Diego] isn’t their father, but they’ve lived happily and so here we are…struggling with them with…school, school, school, because I tell them…it’s the only way they have to get ahead. I tell them they’re going to be like me already [if they don’t apply themselves to school] in that I can no longer do all that I did before […]. But well, it’s that…I ask God to grant me favor and strength to, to see them be somebody, and that, and that they study [go on with their schooling].

Note that in this interview excerpt, Lupe juxtaposes the finding of a good father for her two daughters to the importance of education for her children’s future. Clearly, in seeking to do right by her daughters (before the birth of her other two children with husband Diego) Lupe was simultaneously thinking of both their educación—their upbringing—and their education—their schooling, and the impact of both on her children’s future. Lupe’s background on both sides of the border thus nourished her expansive view of parent participation, a view in which she included her immigration to the U.S., the finding of a good father for her children, and a good education as components that combined would give her children a better future. In short, Lupe did not divorce the concept of good parenting from that of good parent participation in her children’s schooling. For her, they were merely various aspects of a common goal.

Margarita’s daughter Eloisa, in fact, noted that her mother was a hard-working, perseverant role model, and that this inspired her in her own pursuit of higher education. Eloisa and Diana, the only family members in whom Margarita confided regarding her literacy class attendance and her attempts to read and write (see Chapter 5), were in turn especially supportive of their mother. One or the other daughter, in fact, usually Eloisa, attended every parent pot luck and awards ceremony, held two or more times yearly, to show their support. Their support of Margarita in her efforts clearly reflected their appreciation of the efforts and sacrifices that Margarita had made for them.

At the same time, however, Eloisa expressed mixed feelings, wishing that her mother could have worked less and been at home more:

[…] for me, since I think I learned from her…um…you know, hard work and…because she took me with her when I was younger…I went with her [to work cleaning houses] on the weekends, so I learned all my working skills…show up on
time, and do your job well, you know. So I think in a sense…we [Eloisa and her siblings] always see her working and for us…we have learned from her that [kind of hard] work. But I think when you see it from a child’s perspective, I think we wish that she would’ve been more…attentive, not just going to work and coming back to leave us with our father and, you know, you don’t know what’s going on even though your father’s there.

Eloisa’s wish for more of her mother’s attention coincides with normative constructions of a traditional middle class home in which the mother remains home with the children, not the father. Clearly, however, for a variety of reasons, from economic necessity to personal preference, this is not feasible for all families, and Margarita and her husband managed their available resources and raised their children wisely and admirably. In addition, like other mothers in this study, Margarita brought her children along to house-cleaning jobs on the weekends, not what every child wishes for, without doubt, but still a lesson in the importance and execution of hard work. Eloisa and her sisters no doubt exhibited the same resourcefulness in completing their education. Besides their sister who had completed her A.A. in accounting, both Eloisa and her youngest sister, Diana, had graduated from community college and transferred to four-year state universities by the end of this study.

9. Conclusion: Bakhtinian Reverberations in Parent Participation and the Accumulation of Capital

This chapter has focused on many instances of parent participation among the seven focal mothers in this study. From traditionally documented forms of parent involvement, such as helping children with schoolwork and helping in the classroom, to less often acknowledged forms of participation, from home health and hygiene to community involvement and political activism, the data demonstrate that the parents were highly engaged in their children’s education, not only in the limited concept of the word but also in a more expansive sense, more along the lines of la educación, an upbringing leading to good character. I do not at all suggest that parents simply linked the concepts associated with these English-Spanish cognates. Rather, I have suggested that in a larger, Bakhtinian sense, the mothers’ cultural and personal life histories, combined with their social experiences through Jefferson’s many parent programs, contributed to their relatively broad conceptualization of parent participation as compared to the narrow, normative views so prevalent in the scholarly literature. At the same time, we saw parents’ good example and perseverance reflected in their children, as in the Galarza daughters who went on to four-year colleges after having been shuffled through several elementary and high schools.

Acting as devoted parents and model human beings of great character and determination, highly admirable traits indeed, are unfortunately not significantly valued as cultural capital in today’s schools. Rather, parents are expected, along with normative, middle class conceptions, to be teachers at home, minimally endowed with a bachelor’s degree and hopefully with specific funds of academic knowledge ranging from algebra to zoology.

I have suggested that such a conceptualization is flawed in its narrow focus, unreasonable in scope, and entirely unnecessary. Rather, as the data here have demonstrated, the mothers, regardless of their level of formal education and (in)access to print literacy on an individual basis, astutely used social contacts—from informal linkages with parents
and teachers to formal participation in parent classes—to develop social capital that in turn linked them to cultural capital more highly valued yet tacitly expected in schools. This cultural capital, of course, would not amount to the aforementioned bachelor’s degree; rather it consisted of knowledge about how schooling works in the U.S. in general and at Jefferson in particular, and how parents are obliged to interact with schools. As the mothers increasingly “read the world” of Jefferson School, they gained in this knowledge and applied it in practice as involved parents, in direct refutation of claims that less formally educated, working class or poor, minority or immigrant parents are less involved in their children’s education. At the same time, much of the mothers’ family and community efforts are forms of involvement that likely emanated from their cultural heritage, and such efforts merit further study and recognition by researchers and educators. If we permit ourselves to see what we may initially perceive as the mothers’ refracted views of parent involvement and education, then perhaps we can become more aware of their contributions as we expand our own perspectives.
We always accepted that every parent loves their child, wants their child to be successful.
—Former Jefferson Principal Andy Molina

1. Introduction: A View from the School

As noted by scholars (e.g., Dika and Singh, 2002; Horvat et al. 2003, Lareau and Horvat, 1999), several studies in home-school relations have sought to characterize the cultural and social capital of families and link these to outcomes in children’s educational attainment. In effect, much of this so-called home-school literature has focused lopsidedly on the home, often with regard to perceived shortcomings or lack of capital in low-income homes, and has frequently overlooked the role of the school. While Chapter 5 examined focal mothers’ involvement in their own education and Chapter 6, their engagement in that of their children, the current chapter sets its sights on the school itself. Taking as a point of departure the mothers’ development of social and cultural capital through contacts and classes at Jefferson School, this chapter shifts focus to the school in order to provide details of activities undertaken by Jefferson officials to attract and capitalize on parent participation.

At the same time, this chapter explores contrasting findings among school officials’ assessments of parents’ actual participation levels, as those who worked frequently and directly with parents tended to have a high opinion of them and their parent participation efforts, while others, namely teachers, focused primarily on children and their academic performance, tended not to view parents as enthusiastic, involved, or sufficiently endowed with optimal forms of cultural and social capital. Among those interviewed for this study, certain school officials—namely, Parent Coordinator and maestra Ernestina Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano, and former Principal Andy Molina—tended to have a community-centered view of Jefferson School, envisioning Jefferson as an integral part of the surrounding community and the community as vital to the school. These administrators tended to question not only what parents could do for their school, but also what their school could do for parents. Like Fine, following Comer (1989) and Epstein,1 administrators appeared to agree that “it is not enough for families to become more like schools; schools must also become more like families” (Fine, 1993:691). These school officials tended to view the role of parents as critical to the success of the school and vice versa. In contrast, the teachers interviewed, under the direction of a new principal in the final year of the study, concentrated on the classroom and their students’ performance as measured by federal, state, and district standardized tests. Of the three teachers interviewed, none, unlike administrators, saw parents as particularly helpful “partners” in their main objective, that of raising children’s test scores to grade level performance. In addition, with their understandably classroom-focused perspective, teachers experienced limited opportunities to interact with parents and therefore, confirming Epstein’s prediction (2001), tended to assume the worst about parents. As a result, focal mothers’ varied ac-

1 Fine (1993) cites Epstein’s “School and Family Connections” without a date, and I was unable to locate a full citation for this article.
tivities on behalf of their own education as well as that of their children seemed of limited value and were largely invisible to the teachers interviewed. The many ways in which the mothers engaged in parent involvement, both as conventionally recognized and as forged and expanded through their personal, historical, and cultural views were not interpreted by teachers as helpful convergences. Rather, as we shall see, teachers tended to view parents stereotypically, through popular characterizations provided in societal discourse, or authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) that countered notions of parents as willing, helpful, or equal partners. Before examining these teachers’ perspectives, however, I first discuss administrators’ outlook on parents and administrators’ efforts to involve parents at Jefferson.

2. School Efforts

As frequently noted in previous chapters, Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo and Principal Julio Serrano took a decidedly proactive approach in recruiting parents and cultivating parent involvement at Jefferson School. Their highly visible presence on campus, their welcoming smiles and invitations in front of school each morning, and their genuine interest in parents and family welfare, were frequently cited by focal mothers as factors that drew them into parent programs at Jefferson.

But beyond initial invitations, Jefferson offered a great deal of substance and variety in its parent programs. The school offered five programs run by Dr. Olmedo as well as four others sponsored by varying local entities, namely, the Job Training Center (JTC), a local university, and Jefferson’s Silicon Valley School District itself (Chapter 4). Besides English instruction, which the parents requested with unwavering fervor, programs focused on literacy (including the Readers Club, Basic Spanish Literacy, Literature Circles, and the newspaper distribution program), learning strategies (Literature Circles), and school and community involvement (Coffees with the Principal, Migrants Program). In the final year of this study, Ernestina compiled a list with the number of parents participating in most of Jefferson’s programs:

Table 7.1 Number of Participants Per Program, 2005-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Program</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature Circles &amp; Basic Spanish Literacy</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café con el Director (Coffee with the Principal)</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club de Lectores (Readers Club, parent volunteers)</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Parenting Workshops (offered at the District office)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Foundation for Education (PFE)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>426</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, 350 families received free bilingual newspapers weekly through the newspaper distribution program that Ernestina ran, which distributed papers to participating teachers’ classrooms. Students then brought the newspapers home as requested by parents.

Since Jefferson offered such a variety of programs, however, it was difficult to determine how many parents participated in multiple programs offered and what number
represented the total number parents served. The figures compiled, then, contain duplications. Still, even with duplications, for a school of 750 students (500 in K-5 and another 250 in pre-school), 426 instances of parent participation still represents a healthy level of activity.

Previous years had seen comparable levels of involvement. In the initial year of this study, 2003-2004, Dr. Olmedo reported a total of 399 participants in parent programs (including some children in literature circles, then offered for families). In addition, over 300 families received newspapers weekly during that year as well.

Table 7.2 Number of Participants Per Program, 2003-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Program</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workshops &amp; Literature Circles (parents only)</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Spanish Literacy Classes</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café con el Director (Coffee with the Principal)</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Circles for Families, afternoon and evening (adults and children)</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer classes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>399</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In short, thanks in large part to the efforts of school leaders and administrators, Jefferson offered a variety of parent programming and enjoyed a strong base of parent support.

2.1 School Leaders: Respect, Recognition, and Community

Arguably more important than the variety and availability of programming, however, was the philosophy that undergirded much of it—a philosophy of respect, recognition, and community, as consistently practiced and promulgated by leading school officials, namely, Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano, and former Principal Andy Molina. Programs run by Dr. Olmedo drew on a parent-centered, Freirean (1993 [1970]) outlook that sought to honor parents’ humanity, dignity, needs, cultural beliefs, views, and aspirations. Ernestina began each program (which usually lasted in sessions from 8 weeks to an entire semester) by asking parents what themes they wanted to review, carefully listing parents’ concerns (e.g., self-esteem, family communication, approaching adolescence, etc.) and addressing them throughout the session. Sessions thus represented parent concerns and interests, and not necessarily the immediate interests of the school or district, such as raising students’ standardized test scores. In addition, the program, in Ernestina’s words, included skills but was not “skills-based”; rather, it was oriented to the “whole parent.”

Aligned with this orientation and Freirean approach, Ernestina frequently and quite vocally emphasized her respect and admiration for the parents. At the same time, she explicitly countered authoritative discourses, at times echoed in classroom discourse, which characterized the knowledge of non-print literate adults as like that of children. In one classroom exchange, during my first visit to a Basic Spanish Literacy class, Ernestina did not hesitate to remind parents that they were rich in knowledge and experience. The fol-
lowing fieldnote excerpt presents such an exchange. In this instance, all present in class introduced themselves, which took place whenever a newcomer joined the class.

The two older men on the left side of the room, don José and don Mario, not only introduced themselves but also gave something of a testimonial. They spoke of knowing little more than children when they began the course. Don Mario said, “Era como un niño” (I was like a child). Others, including Noemi, echoed the comment. Later, when the introductions were complete, Ernestina, standing at the head of the classroom, disputed the characterization of the parents’ knowledge as like that of children. She addressed the parents directly, and the following exchange with Adriana, a woman in her fifties, ensued:

Ernestina: “Sin ofender, han dicho que están empezando como niños. No es verdad. Tienen experiencias, un vocabulario rico—más que el mío—vivencias, sufrimiento.”

Adriana: “Pero maestra, me siento así porque nunca pisé una escuela.”

Ernestina: “Pero, ¿qué dijimos el otro día cuando hicimos la dinámica? La vida es una educación. La educación no se limita al salón de clase.”

Ernestina: I don’t wish to offend, but you’ve said that you’re starting out like children. It’s not true. You have experiences, a rich vocabulary—richer than mine—life experiences, suffering.”

Adriana: But maestra, I feel that way because I never set foot in a school.

Ernestina: But what did we say the other day when we did the dinámica? Life is an education. Education isn’t limited to the classroom.

(Fieldnote excerpt, 6/2/2003)

In the above exchange, la maestra Ernestina, as she was respectfully known to the parents, not only countered a common characterization in societal discourse of the non-print literate adult as childlike, but she also reminded the parents that life itself affords a variety of opportunities for learning outside of school (Hull and Schultz, 2001, 2003). At the same time, Ernestina ceded the floor, allowing Adriana to air an opposing view. But la maestra first expressed admiration for the parents’ oral language ability, for their rich vocabulary, which she humbly characterized as fuller than her own, echoing the findings of several scholars (Bhimji, 2005; Guerra, 1998; Valdés, 1982; Vásquez et al., 1994; Zentella, 1997, 2005a, 2005b) who’ve illustrated the richness of oral interactions among Spanish speakers in the U.S.

Like Dr. Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano was visible and vocal in his encouragement of and admiration for Jefferson parents. For Mr. Serrano, this admiration began with his upbringing: he credited his mother, a migrant worker who single-handedly raised four children, for inspiring in him both tenacity and optimism. Mr. Serrano made frequent contact with parents, not only in front of school each morning and at Coffees with the Principal on Tuesdays, but also at evening school events, including potluck/parent awards ceremonies, often called “convivencias”. As Ernestina explained it to me, the term convivencia, from its Latin roots meaning “living together,” evoked a spirit of celebration and sharing in community. Principal Serrano frequently took advantage of these convivencias
and other Jefferson events to interact with parents, express his regard for them, and encourage them to continue their studies. At one convivencia for parents in the Fundamental Spanish Literacy classes and Literature Circles, Mr. Serrano used his welcome address to remind parents that…

“Los hijos son buenos imitadores” (Children are good imitators). (His comment earned giggles and nods from several parents, in recognition of the truth of this old adage.) Principal Serrano then explained that he, too, was still in school [completing his master’s degree and principal’s credential], indicating that education is a lifelong process, and that our children will follow our example. (Fieldnote excerpt, 12/17/2003)

Along with encouraging and respecting parents, Mr. Serrano, like Dr. Olmedo, grasped the economic and resultant living conditions that many of the parents faced. As he explained in an interview, it was through home visits that he became fully aware of what some of them were up against:

The majority of them [Jefferson students] are Spanish-speaking. Most of them are uh…first generation immigrants um…low income, most of them get free or reduced lunch…[generally]…living in substandard conditions. They’re very resilient I think. Because um…I know because when I was at [teaching at nearby] Olympia [School] um…one of the…I was really involved with families and I would make home visits, and so you can see the conditions they live under. And then…no wonder…I mean to do their homework um…to study. Where can they study? They don’t have a place…because they have two or three families living in the same apartment. How can you do homework? It’s all chaos. And so you know I, I understand their condition, but I also think we need to support them as much as we can to make them successful here.

Such conditions, said Mr. Serrano, made co-curricular programming, such as after-school tutoring, homework, and recreation programs, counseling, and parent programming, all the more vital.

Mr. Serrano explained that such efforts sprang from his philosophy of school as community. School events and programs functioned as community activities, and vice versa, as the school, youth center, biblioteca and other community entities and organizations worked in tandem, not only through mutual communication, but through their interconnecting physical presence: parents held meetings at the youth center, youths ran special events at the school once a month, and local organizations, from the JTC to the local neighborhood association, held classes and meetings on the Jefferson campus and in the biblioteca. In addition, Mr. Serrano worked with a variety of organizations, from the Rotary Club to the City Council to private donors, both corporate and individual, to obtain funds to support special programs, enabling him to hire Ernestina and two new counselors, send students to science camp, buy new books for the school library, and support a whole host of other programs and incidental school needs.

Interestingly, in the interview excerpted above, when I asked Mr. Serrano to discuss Jefferson’s standardized test scores, he explained that the school had not met all of its target scores for the previous year (2003-2004) and spoke at length (about 10 minutes of
a 50-minute conversation) about curricular modifications implemented in an effort to improve scores for the year in progress. Notably, and in contrast to some parent involvement literature (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Swap, 1993; Yan and Lin, 2005) as well as one of three Jefferson teachers interviewed, Principal Serrano looked directly to the curriculum as a way to improve students’ scores and did not mention parents in this light. In sum, similar to Dr. Olmedo’s approach to the “whole parent,” Mr. Serrano looked to the “whole school” as community. When it came to improving test scores, parents were not part of a ‘quick fix’ or panacea (Domina, 2005); rather, the school was responsible for children’s academic performance, while parents were an integral part of a larger, school-community.

Similarly, former Principal Andy Molina, semi-retired but still active in the community, saw community efforts as a key to Jefferson’s vitality. It was under his stewardship that the JTC and neighborhood association began using the Jefferson campus and the bibioteca moved to its new facility on Jefferson School’s block.

In addition, like Ernestina Olmedo and Julio Serrano, Mr. Molina expressed very clearly that he believed in treating others with respect:

Mr. Molina: People need to feel comfortable to work with you. That’s the first key, I, I told everybody in the [main] offices [when I was in charge], when somebody comes in, we greet them and acknowledge them with a smile. That’s the first thing you do. Say, “I’ll be with you in a moment.” Just let them know that you saw a person there. And they know. An experience that happened to me just today, I went to a school, I had an appointment, and I, and I come in there…not one person (there were two people there), said, “How can I help you?” “Someone will help you.” “Are you here to see somebody?”—something to say [acknowledge] you are there, I see you as a person. And nobody, nothing else, is more important than a person […]. And so as soon as somebody walks in that you don’t know, you say something to them. “How can I help you?” “Are you here to see the principal?” or, or […].

Ali: I was helped [when I entered Jefferson’s main office for the first time, during Andy Molina’s tenure] as soon as I walked in.

Mr. Molina: Yeah, that’s a culture you develop. And kids, especially kids! “What are you doing here?”—no! You say, “Hi, can I help you?” the same as you would to a superintendent or anybody else.

Such a culture of respect was essential, according to Mr. Molina, because, like Mr. Serrano, he recognized children’s capacity to imitate. And Mr. Molina similarly called his mother, a migrant worker widowed with thirteen children when Andy was only two years old, his role model:

My mother always treated me with respect. I think you just learn that. That’s what I told my staff. Kids learn more from your actions than what you say. They are observing all the time. You know, they don’t have all the vocabulary and everything, but they have their eyes and they have their feelings. They can sense, kids. So you need to behave the way you want them to behave.

Mr. Molina likewise extended this respect and consideration to parents:
We always accepted that every parent loves their child, wants their child to be successful. They just don’t have all the knowhow or the experience or the knowledge to do it, but they have the willingness to learn. So we had lots of classes. We [...] started what they called PFE—Parent Foundation for Education [...] I said we’re gonna make it convenient for them [the parents], not convenient for us [school staff].

Making parent programs convenient for parents, said Andy, frequently meant offering classes and workshops in the early mornings or evenings, not starting at 8:30 a.m. during regular school hours.

In sum, in a variety of ways both moral and material, Jefferson School’s leadership modeled and programmatically enacted recognition and respect for parents and others. This respect was rooted in their upbringing and was often manifest in the leaders’ own humility, as when Ernestina praised the parents’ Spanish vocabulary as richer than her own,2 or when Mr. Serrano, during cleanup after a convivencia, mopped the cafeteria floor instead of leaving it for the custodian. They likewise saw the school and community as intimately intertwined—not as partially overlapping circles in a Venn diagram (cf. Epstein, 2001) or as having separate borders. Rather, they were corresponding facets of a communal gem. As such, parent involvement was for them an integral element to the community welfare and thus to the welfare of Jefferson School and its students.

But the three teachers interviewed for this study—Josefina Garza, Celia Luna, and Laura Barajas—expressed, in varying degrees, dissenting views of Jefferson parents and the community. In contrast to the school leadership, these teachers did not, by and large, view Jefferson parents as especially involved, nor did the teachers express a view of the school-as-community. A contributing factor to their dissent may have been the timing of my interviews with them. All three teachers, selected for interviews because they were or had been teachers of a child member of a focal family, met with me in 2006, during the year following Mr. Serrano’s departure, likely reflecting the goals of a new principal heavily focused on raising Jefferson’s standardized test scores.3 Two of the teachers consulted, in fact, interviewed with me shortly after their year-end review with the new prin-

2 I do not mean to suggest that I necessarily disagree with Dr. Olmedo’s characterization of the parents’ vocabulary as richer than her own, but rather that, in contrast to her authoritative role as a teacher, it was humbling for her to air this comparison to her students, the parents.

3 Because of her arrival late in the study during a year dedicated to follow-up interviews, the new principal was not included in this study. The teachers interviewed reported several specific new initiatives she implemented to address and improve students’ standardized test scores. At the same time, a public manifestation of this heightened focus on scores appeared in a hallway leading to the school library:

A new mural, painted on a 4-by-12-foot canvas, hung on the wall there. The mural, created by a parent volunteer in amazingly vibrant color, depicted the characters of the Wizard of Oz strolling down the yellow brick road. Also on the mural were nametags out of construction paper in the shape of seashells. On each shell was the name of a student and his/her score on the State Standards test: “Basic,” “Proficient,” or “Advanced.” Students who scored below these ratings did not have their names on the poster; only those who achieved one of these ratings did. Such a public display of individual test scores had not been done at Jefferson in past years, nor had I observed anything of the kind at the eleven Silicon Valley District schools I’d visited for a previous study. (Fieldnotes, 6/8/2006)
principal. While it made sense to time their interviews at the end of a busy school year, the result may have been to contextualize our discussions in similar terms as they had dealt with their principal. In addition, authoritative discourses, cultural subtexts stemming from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and highly touted negative comments from public figures, were also likely at play.

But also significant in limiting the teachers’ view of parental involvement was their vantage point, the classroom. Just as many parents send their children off to school to wonder what goes on in the classroom each day, so teachers, from inside the classroom, can be left to wonder what goes on at home. In comparison to Jefferson administrators, who made frequent contact with parents, for teachers, such contact was greatly limited. In fact, of the three teachers interviewed, only Laura Barajas, who had previously volunteered in the evening Basic Spanish literacy classes, expressed awareness of the challenges that many Jefferson parents faced. It would appear, then, that a distal effect was at play: the greater the distance between school officials and parents, that is, the less contact a school official had with parents, the less likely s/he was to view parents favorably. In the following sections, I explore two facets of this distal effect—physical and social—and then move on to authoritative discourses, all of which may have contributed to the casting of parents, at least in the teachers’ eyes, in a less sympathetic, more stereotypic light.

3. Viewing Parents from the Vantage of the Classroom: A Disadvantage?

As noted, the teachers interviewed were, at some point during the course of this study, teachers of a focal child. Specifically, Josefina Garza was the first-grade teacher of Sophie Machado, and Celia Luna the fourth-grade teacher of Juanito Sandoval, during the final year of the study (2005-2006). In addition, Laura Barajas, besides volunteering in the basic Spanish literacy classes for parents during academic years 2002-2004, had also been the third-grade teacher of Juanito Sandoval in 2004-2005. Additionally, the teachers shared somewhat similar backgrounds: Josefina and Celia were first-generation Mexican Americans who’d arrived in the U.S. during childhood, although Celia’s mother was U.S. born and bilingual, and Laura Barajas was the U.S. born daughter of Mexican immigrants. Like a great majority of teachers at Jefferson School, they were bilingual Latinas. Further, all had grown up in the Silicon Valley. The teachers’ rather similar cultural roots, however, belied many varied experiences, from differences in schooling experiences to varied encounters as adults. Ms. Garza, for instance, specialized in bilingual education and had dabbled in parent involvement programs. Ms. Luna was pursuing a master’s degree in educational leadership and served on the board of the teachers union local. Ms. Barajas, for her part, had studied psychology and had been a longtime volunteer in Jefferson’s parents program.

Despite their diverse experiences, all of the teachers expressed frustrations, albeit varied ones, surrounding the challenges of working at a school like Jefferson, now programmed for improvement (PI) because it had not met all of its objectives in standardized testing during the previous academic year. The teachers, especially focused under their new principal on raising students’ scores, tended to view parents through the lens of this goal, seeing as truly helpful mainly those parents who might assist either in honing testing skills, or at least more broadly but directly contributing to the improved academic performance of their children. Through the lens of such a testing agenda, even an actively
involved mother like Lupe Machado could be—and was—perceived by teacher Josefina Garza as the ineffective mother of a troubled child. Unaware of the family’s struggle with homelessness, Ms. Garza did not appear to sympathize with the family’s plight. Rather, she perceived Sophie’s parents as a squabbling couple insufficien
tly attentive to their daughter. To her credit, although Ms. Garza may have written off Lupe and Diego as ineffective parents, she did not write off Sophie. Instead, Ms. Garza continued to work with the little girl throughout the school year in the hopes of improving Sophie’s behavior and sense of wellbeing along with her reading and math skills.

3.1 Teacher Josefina Garza

Josefina Garza immigrated to the U.S. from Northern Mexico as a child, and thus her history was not unlike that of many Jefferson students. A product of San José public schools, from grammar to high school to her graduation from San José State University, Ms. Garza had gone on to teach at two Silicon Valley District schools, Jane Lester and Olympia (each with a profile similar to that of Jefferson), for more than 10 years before her transfer to Jefferson, where she had in turn spent another 10 years. But having immigrated from Mexico, grown up in the Silicon Valley, and taught at two schools in Jefferson’s district, did not necessarily give Ms. Garza the inside track to understanding parents’ daily challenges or their efforts on behalf of their children’s schooling.

Still, Ms. Garza, had had some direct contact with parents. Earlier in her career she had taught English to adults, and at Jefferson, she had also helped administer parent workshops before Ernestina Olmedo came on board:

Josefina: Once I proceeded to Jefferson [about 1995], then I took an interest in working with some of the parents as far as doing some of the parent workshops.
Ali: What kinds of workshops?
Josefina: Uh, we did actually some reading, writing, and just parental skills that they can do at home with the children.
Ali: Such as?
Josefina: Such as reading, how to read with their children, what things to look for, what type of activities to do with them. And we also, we also made packets for them to work with. And those were some of the things that I did with them [the parents].

Admirable though it was to spend additional time and effort to work with parents, Ms. Garza’s general description of the workshops and signaling of “parental skills” and “packets...to work with” suggest certain assumptions on her part: that parents could by-and-large read and write, understand print materials, and hone a set of school-like “skills”—to be imparted unidirectionally from teacher to parents, and then parents to children—seamlessly from school to home. As demonstrated throughout this study, however, such assumptions run counter to many parents’ realities. Indeed, Jefferson programming under Ernestina Olmedo, in a Freirean vein, attempted to address the “whole parent” through a process of give-and-take, not a unidirectional flow of information from teacher to parents and parents to children. Freirean pedagogy sought to acknowledge the gamut of parents’ experience, intelligence, and cultural background, which typically included widely varying levels of access to print literacy and formal education. At the same time, the various classes offered sought to address parents’ literacy needs according to
parents’ differing histories, circumstances, and aspirations. In Ms. Garza’s characterization, however, even after I twice requested elaboration, her parent outreach efforts did not include such understandings of parents and their needs, goals, or talents. Her efforts appeared to have been structured, by-and-large, so as to impart knowledge versus gather it, to gain assistance versus offer it, and to seek understanding versus cultivate it.

In terms of more recent interactions with parents, Ms. Garza pointed to her work with the Readers’ Club, which she hoped would lead to improved academic performance for her students. Additionally, Ms. Garza said she became involved in the club to help ease some new challenges she’d faced that year. A bilingual teacher for many years previously, under the new principal, Ms. Garza was for the first time assigned a structured English immersion (SEI) class, which happened also to be a kindergarten and first-grade combination class.

Ms. Garza: This year I actually worked with Mrs. Olmedo doing the reading club in the mornings. And that was actually very beneficial. And uh actually this year was a learning experience for me because being…coming from a bilingual class, this year I taught the SEI class which is English only, and…this is my first year doing that. Along with that I taught a combination class, which was very challenging […]. So uh I guess experiencing that uh new avenue for me I see a lot of the children had difficulty reading and writing and uh and, ya know, Mrs. Olmedo’s reading club, so I took an interest to [in] that because I wanted my children to be at grade level. And I knew that was a challenge for them because some of the parents spoke only Spanish and didn’t speak English. So some of the curriculum that was going home, [the parents] didn’t really know how to work with them [the children] as far as homework […]. So there was a lot of challenges that came about. So I was trying to find uh ways I guess to meet my needs, my needs and the children’s needs ‘cause I, I of course, my goal was for them to succeed.

For Ms. Garza, then, the Readers’ Club held the promise of improving parents’ ability to help outside the classroom because the parents didn’t speak English and couldn’t do homework with their children. But elaborating further on parent participation in the Readers’ Club, Ms. Garza’s initial evaluation of the program as “very beneficial” became negative.

Ms. Garza: Ah, the parents did take some interest to [in] that [the Readers’ Club]. I actually started with the kindergarten class and that seemed to take off really well but uh, after a while I wanted to change it to the first grade. And that didn’t seem to take as…uh succeed as much as the kindergarten’s. It started very well but then, uh throughout the time it just started declining.
Ali: In terms of the kids’ participation or the parents’?
Ms. Garza: Uh both. Because some of the parents couldn’t stay ‘cause they worked, so that was kind of challenging. So uh finding that out that they couldn’t stay with them and so on well it [participation] just kind of dropped.

Ms. Garza was thus ambivalent. She felt the Readers’ Club had benefitted her kindergartners but not so much her first graders, whom, she admitted, she invited into the club after initially concentrating on her kindergartners. She also pointed, in part, to a trend Ernestina and I had noted in parent program cycles: parents tended to attend in large numbers early in a program’s session, often lag in attendance in the middle, and then re-
turn with great enthusiasm in the final weeks. This tendency recurred in all programs I visited regularly, and Ernestina commented on it independently from me. But unlike Ms. Garza’s assumption that parents dropped the program entirely, Ernestina knew that they would come back. And they did. Furthermore, in contrast to Ms. Garza’s negative assessment, Ernestina’s outlook on the program was very upbeat:

Dr. Olmedo said it was wonderful the way parents and children discussed ideas in the children’s stories they’d read, such as Jesse cruzó el océano, about a Jewish immigrant girl around the turn of the Twentieth Century, and El béisbol nos salvó, which took place during the Japanese internment of World War II. One mother, said Ernestina, commented, “Yo no sabía que mi hijo tenía esto en él” (I didn’t know my son had this in him), referring to the boy’s reactions to the stories. But Ernestina added that it been hard on the parents coming to school at 7:30 every morning for eight weeks straight, and that there was some drop off. But in the end, she said, the parents were asking when they’d be starting up again! Dr. Olmedo had tried to offer afternoon classes at one point, since that seemed more civil, but the attendance wasn’t as good—too many working parents could only attend in the early morning. (Fieldnote excerpt, 6/16/06)

In her above assessment of the success of the Club de Lectores, Dr. Olmedo focused on the enthusiasm for literature that the club had generated and the family togetherness that sharing literature could engender. But for Ms. Garza, the success of the Readers’ Club had rested on whether her students, many of whom were learning to read in English at the same time that they were learning to speak it, would be able to read “at grade level.” As such, the club had been a disappointment:

Well [the Readers Club took place] in the morning it was around 7:30, but that seemed to succeed more so than in the afternoon. Yeah, I started that [the afternoon club] the second semester. But that started well, but then it started declining so it was just uh was just stopped. Just the parent participation. Because the parents couldn’t come, they were working, and we wanted uh child and parent participation. So that was kind of difficult to do. So that in itself was a challenge, trying to find ways that uh that could help those students, because actually those were the students that I felt really needed that assistance, because they were below grade level and they still are as far as their reading and their math.

Ms. Garza hoped that parent participation might give her students a boost toward reading and doing arithmetic at “grade level.” But alas, the Readers Club was no magic bullet. Indeed, even with impeccable parent and child attendance, it would be hard to imagine any 8-week program of half-an-hour each morning that could swiftly bring most of Ms. Garza’s students to “grade level” in reading and math, whatever performance objectives this might actually entail. Still, in Ms. Garza’s mind, sagging attendance in the Readers Club—and sagging parent participation—were contributing factors to a critical problem that her students were not performing at grade level standards.

Another factor influencing her students’ performance, said Ms. Garza, was lack of preparation: some of her kindergartners and even one first-grader had never attended
school before and were learning basic skills, like holding a pencil, for the first time. Ms. Garza cited only lack of parental interest as the cause of this, versus extenuating family circumstances such as migrancy or poverty, or lack of access to information. Interestingly, however, when I asked Ms. Garza what she knew about getting one’s child enrolled in preschool, she responded, “Uh, I’m not sure of the process.”

Although she didn’t see family circumstances as a potential barrier to enrollment in preschool, Ms. Garza did believe that family struggles, in addition to the SEI classroom, might have brought about discipline issues along with lower academic performance in as her class that year:

When I’m in the bilingual class [versus this year’s SEI class] the children seem to be more respectful, more in tune, uh they’re willing to learn they’re motive, motivated. Versus this year, even though the population seems to be pretty much the same as far as being Hispanic or Latinos, but the children themselves have…lack of motivation to learn. They have a lot of discipline problems and um what I found this year is that there is a lot of problems at home as far as divorce um that having a shelter to live in just a lot of resources that are probably accumulating [viz. decreasing], and I don’t know if this has to do with how, why children are behaving this way but uh there was a lot of issues as far as separating, um going through a lot of emotional problems, still so now.

In fact, in describing the discipline problems she faced inside the classroom and the circumstantial problems families faced outside the classroom, Ms. Garza almost immediately brought up Sophie Machado, daughter of Lupe Machado and a first grader in her class that year.

Yeah I found that a lot of the children in my class uh have discipline problems that along with that some of the children were very um not willing to study not very motivated and just in itself discipline was a very big issue. Sometimes Sophie would get very stubborn. If she wanted to do something she would just sit there and not move, and uh if she didn’t get her way she would start crying. It would go to that point where I was having a lot of issues with her, so I brought it to her mom’s attention and the mom seemed to be very aware of how she was because she was the same way at home. And uh, uh I guess she didn’t know how to solve that problem ‘cause she said she’d tried different things at home but it wasn’t working.

Ms. Garza brought Sophie’s discipline problems to Lupe, who said she had likewise experienced difficulties with Sophie’s behavior. Ms. Garza further interpreted Sophie’s behavior problems as owing to her parents’ presumed separation:

And um, I guess another issue was that um, there was, I believe, the parents were going through a separation and um, I’m not sure if they’re still separated or not but I guess that’s very personal. But um before then I never was able to meet the dad, but now I met him a few times and uh one time uh Sophie came into the class and told me that um she was crying ‘cause she was saying that her dad mentioned that uh that they were separated the mom and dad…I dunno I guess a lot of issues are going on at home. And uh along with that uh, Sophie was also having problems at school as far as keeping her hands to herself uh, fighting with other children and uh, in addition to
that she also had has problems with her speech. She goes to speech now. Then I found out lately that she has uh, I think an infection in her ear, ‘cause I always see a discharge coming out, and the mom was telling me that um that she had gone to the doctor and she was getting medication but that she’s losing some of the hearing. But uh, so there’s a lot of issues going on with that. As far as her academics um, she is a little below grade level as far as her reading and uh, and she gets distracted very easily. I always have to be very positive with her and you know try to help her ‘cause I know what she’s going through. But uh sometimes it becomes very difficult because she is not the only one with these issues there’s other children in the class that are going through the same type of um discipline so it makes it very difficult.

Ms. Garza was aware of difficulties in Sophie’s life, but from the vantage point of the classroom and her brief interactions with Lupe and Diego, Ms. Garza understood very little about the nature of the family’s problems. She did not understand that the City evicted the Machados from their unpermit ted apartment or that Sophie’s ear infection arose during the family’s six weeks of homelessness. Not wishing to pry into the family’s difficulties, she did not understand that the family had suffered a calamity out of their control but had dealt with it tenaciously.

For her own part, aware that Sophie was suffering, Ms. Garza commendably sought to work with her, both academically and emotionally, through the tough times. Still, for Ms. Garza, Sophie’s parents were responsible for their child’s discipline problems. Ms. Garza’s detachment from the Machados and limited focus on Sophie’s classroom behavior appear rendered verbally in the above passage through Ms. Garza’s frequent references to Lupe and Diego as “the” mom and “the” dad, not Sophie’s mom and dad. No matter that Lupe Machado had been active in Jefferson’s parent classes, Readers Club, Coffees with the Principal, and parent workshops at the District Office and youth center, and no matter that she had attended parent meetings on behalf of her four children at three schools. In Ms. Garza’s eyes, Lupe was the ineffective mother of a child with discipline problems. In fact, when I asked Ms. Garza if she would characterize anyone as a model of parent involvement, she discounted all except one mother who had asked if she could volunteer in the classroom daily. As for the others, she said, “they would just volunteer to go on field trips or things like that.”

Fortunately, although she often seemed to shift her focus to Lupe’s perceived shortcomings, Ms. Garza continued to give Sophie her full consideration and attention:

Her mom was actually um very helpful when we had the reading club, because she used to bring her [Sophie] in the morning, early in the morning. But the only problem was that she [Lupe] couldn’t stay with her throughout the reading hour because she [Lupe] had to leave to go to work which, ya know, I understand, but I know the mom was going through a lot of issues herself as far as the separation and her work, and those are all issues that, ya know, one has to kind o’ work with. Yeah, so that’s kind o’ challenging but uh knowing that Sophie has that uh willingness to accomplish certain tasks, I can see that, but I believe that she, aside from that, needs more counseling, uh needs more of a hug maybe or that love security.

In short, focused on her students and from within the vantage point of the classroom, Ms. Garza maintained a narrow perspective of their lives, not fully informed, at least certainly in Sophie’s case, of extenuating circumstances. This virtual keyhole perspective, perhaps
further narrowed by the prevailing professional goal of seeing her students perform at “grade level,” effectively sheltered Ms. Garza from a broader view of family issues. While her desire to see her students succeed despite the challenges they faced was admirable, Ms. Garza’s misconstrual of the Machado family’s homelessness as a mere divorce squabble may have prevented her from seeking the most appropriate resources that could help the family—and Sophie—get back on track as quickly as possible.

But in addition to such physical distancing effects, were social class distances also at play? Could it have been that Ms. Garza’s membership in the middle class, wrought by years of formal education in the same Silicon Valley whose impoverished members remain largely invisible to the mainstream, somehow removed the Machados from her overall view? A fair and reliable answer to this question is beyond the scope of this dissertation, whose ethnographic focus was parents. But some of Ms. Garza’s apparent assumptions, for example:

- that through parent workshops, learning flows unidirectionally and seamlessly from teachers to parents to children,
- that short-term reading programs could improve children’s classroom performance, but only with parent participation, and
- that if children had not attended preschool or kindergarten or learned to use a pencil, that it was only due to lack of parental interest

indicate that she was somehow out of touch with parents’ reality. Moreover, her interpretation of the Machado family’s plight provides further substantiation for the distal effects, whether physical, social, or both, likely at play in distancing for Ms. Garza the worlds of home and classroom.

3.2 Celia Luna: Fourth-grade teacher to Juanito Sandoval

Like Josefina Garza, fourth-grade bilingual teacher Celia Luna, with 15 years’ teaching experience, saw herself as having faced difficult challenges that year. Jefferson’s bilingual program, in keeping with District stipulations, used English for all but social studies instruction by the fourth and fifth grades. So although her classroom included several English learners like Juanito Sandoval, Ms. Luna faced the routine challenge of teaching most of their core coursework in English. More importantly for Ms. Luna, working on her master’s degree in educational leadership at San José State at the time and the board secretary of the teachers union local, she felt that the theories and best practices she was studying in graduate school and discussing with colleagues were at odds with the mandates of working at a PI school like Jefferson. As Ms. Luna explained:

I feel a sense of disconnect with what I am learning and with what I am applying here at my job…to the point where you feel compromised um…
Ali: So what, where is the source of the disconnect? What you’re learning you can’t put into practice?
Ms. Luna: No.
Ali: And, and why is that?
Ms. Luna: Because we have uh…pacing calendars. Because we have guidelines, because we have to do so much…with little time.
Ali: You said pacing calendars?
Ms. Luna: pacing calendars, where we have curriculum maps that guide us to what um... where to be...um... by a particular time. So my question has been quality versus quantity: What do you want? Exposure to all materials for the children, or are you actually going to give them time to digest it? I think as good teachers we know that children sometimes require a little more time and different modalities to grasp the concept. But because you have the pressure, this pacing calendar and, and deadlines, you can’t do that...or, or finding the balance of being able to do that is tough.

Ms. Luna gave an example of the disconnect and explained further the ramifications of not keeping up with the pacing calendar:

Um, I, I, started out as a kindergarten teacher, then I moved up to second grade now I’m in fourth grade. Um...kindergarten was all about manipulatives. “Math their way” was the program when I first started. In second grade, we also used a lot of manipulatives...math programs require a lot of logic, thinking, but they have manipulatives to figure out, you know, the concepts. [But] you go to the fourth grade and it’s more just textbook based. Not to say that as a good teacher I can’t incorporate manipulatives; I know I should. But because of our calendar map and our pacing, it’s harder to do. Because if you take the time to use manipulatives, you risk falling behind the pacing calendar. And if you fall behind the pacing calendar, when it’s time [for students] to take the performance-based exam you’re not, because you didn’t cover certain things, your kids are not going do well on that test, because that test includes everything. So it’s that catch 22. And, and that’s what I mean about the disconnect and finding your balance. And you know what you need to do but it’s hard to do it um, with the time that’s given to you, yeah...and math, that’s an example.

Ali: um hum. Do you find it in other subjects too?

Ms. Luna: Um...language arts um...there again, in the second grade we used to incorporate art or something to make the story come alive. [In the fourth grade] you can’t, you just don’t have the time.

Explaining these frustrations and pressures then brought Ms. Luna to tears:

I just, I just sat with the principal and got my evaluation, “Highly effective.” So she recognizes my hard work, but the emotional part of it is the frustration. I know I can do better. I know I can. Give me the time. Trust me as a professional. And seems like that trust isn’t there. We have to follow the mandates. So that’s part of the struggle.

Ms. Luna also pointed to the more general challenge of what might be going on for students outside the classroom, and so I asked her to talk about students’ home life and their parents:

Ms. Luna: …there is so much I can’t control. I can control as best I can what’s in the classroom, but I can’t control the experiences kids come with or what they bring, or what their home life is like. But I am expected to have high standards.

Ali: Let’s talk about that, let’s talk bout parents and home life.

Ms. Luna: Ok.

Ali: How do you see the, say, the parents this year or maybe just in general? How do you view the parents you’ve known here?

Ms. Luna: It’s a frustration. I think I sympathize. I am the child of an immigrant. My father doesn’t speak English. I mean, I get it. I know it. I was in first grade and didn’t
speak English, you know, and I think that’s, I see my role not just as a teacher but as a role model. And it’s very frustrating when I see parents don’t… not, not doing more or, or the feeling of um…feeling of complacency.

Ms. Luna, like Ms. Garza, pointed to increased discipline problems in her classroom. Behavior for the year, she said, had been “atrocious.” Parents, she said, are required to sign disciplinary forms outlining Jefferson’s program of consequences for misbehavior. In addition, Ms. Luna sends notes home and does “a lot of phone calls.” But not all parents can read and understand such forms or notes, and not all are well versed in handling the telephone (Chapter 5). For Ms. Luna, however, the problem was broader still:

I think they [parents] do agree for the most part with you [the teacher], but I think they don’t have the tools to know how, how should I say it, I mean…parenting skills, how to deal with a child that becomes rebellious.

Ms. Luna identified a real problem: many children, including pre-adolescents test the waters of rebelliousness and challenge their parents, regardless of socioeconomic or immigration status, ethnic background, or other social factors. That being said, the special challenges faced by immigrant parents and children in a new culture are well documented (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Qin, 2005). In her memoir of immigrating to Canada from Poland during WWII, New York Times journalist Eva Hoffman talks about the difficulties her mother faced when her daughters’ rebelliousness began to unfold: “‘In Poland, I would have known how to bring you up, I would have known what to do’” Hoffman quotes her mother (1989:145). In a new country, her parents found their traditional ways under constant siege, upsetting their cultural balance, forcing them to decide between increased authoritarianism or lenience.

But many Jefferson parents were aware of these issues. In curriculum planning for parent classes, when giving input to Ernestina on themes they hoped to cover, parents repeatedly requested that discussion topics include family communication, discipline, and adolescence.

But Ms. Luna, steeped in the year’s frustrations, instead pointed to parents’ misplaced values as a cause of student misbehavior. She echoed the much-touted complaint of comedian Bill Cosby. In May of 2004, at a gala dinner to commemorate Brown v. Board of Education, he “assailed poor black mothers and fathers for their horrible parenting skills, saying they buy their kids ‘$500 sneakers’ but refuse to ‘spend $250 on Hooked on Phonics’” (Dyson, M.E., 2005:xii). Ms. Luna’s words below parallel Cosby’s authoritative discourse, referencing poor parenting skills, misplaced priorities, “Nintendos,” and “tennis shoes):

I find over the years a lot of parents want to make up for what they lacked as a child. Now that they’re working and they’re earning some money, they want to give their child what they didn’t have. Well, that’s fine but your child should still learn, you know. And um…a lot of these kids are getting things too easy in my opinion, you know. Nintendos, expensive tennis shoes, and I know the parents are working hard, [but] they really can’t afford it. They want to please the child, or they want to prove to themselves that I am doing OK, I am able to buy this for my child. So that’s just in general some of the things that I’ve seen um… and just parents that are simple-minded, and these kids are growing up learning to manipulate the parents.
Although Ms. Luna did not cite Bill Cosby directly or consciously, her words evoked his. She added that she found parents simple-minded in the sense that their love for and trust in their children led them to overlook the possibility of their being manipulated.

Classroom discipline problems, as in the conversation with Ms. Garza, immediately brought Ms. Luna to a discussion of parents and what they appeared to lack. During the course of our conversations, it failed to occur to either teacher that perhaps a highly regimented, tightly scheduled curriculum calendar might have some role in children’s relative capacity to focus, instead of misbehave, in the classroom. Still, Ms. Garza had pointed to the possibility that in her classroom, the use of nearly all English might have been a source of student distraction and misbehavior. For Ms. Luna, however, the sole source of student misbehavior was the family.

But at the same time, she allowed that a rebellious, unstudious child can hail from the same family as a disciplined, studious one:

Ali: And do you happen to have in the same family [as the rebellious student], you know, the kid who’s really respectful? […]
Ms. Luna: Yes!!! Yes, yes, I had it this year. And what I determined with the second child, is that he, he is frustrated because I think, I suspect, that he has a learning disability. And his older brother was a top student. So that also is part of his frustration. So yeah, I have had that.
Ali: Did the second one [younger sibling] get tested or anything?
Ms. Luna: I did all my paper work, so hopefully he’ll get tested next year.

Mothers tended to recognize and speak about their children’s differing learning styles and relative studiousness. In this case, the fact that a top student and a child with potential learning disabilities could come from the same family is an indication that there are factors which parents, just like teachers, cannot entirely control.

But as each school year closes, teachers tend to focus where they or their students may have missed the mark; unlike the hopeful, optimistic outlook that predominates in September, teachers in June can feel tired and frustrated. Thus, even though Ms. Luna was highly positive specifically about focal child Juanito Sandoval, her enthusiasm gave way to more frustrations. She acclaimed Juanito as “amazing” and said he was one of four students in her class whom she had awarded with a certificate as “most improved.” But at the same time, Ms. Luna saw problems to overcome, pointing to Juanito’s mother, Carolina, as “illiterate” but “overcoming her obstacles”:

Ali: What, what’s your perspective on his [Juanito’s] family?
Ms. Luna: I’ve met the mother…a few times. She came to every conference. I know she participates in Ernestina Olmedo’s literacy circles. Um…she is illiterate I, I know she is not, she can barely sign her name um…but she comes in and asks, not too often but she, she was here for back-to-school night and open house. She has high standards for him. He is the baby of the family so I think they are putting a lot of hope in him. And he knows. Um…they are encouraging him um…he has support and um…yeah, I mean she is doing, she is overcoming her obstacles to make sure her child has those…does well.

But in contrast to Ms. Luna’s view of a struggling “illiterate” mother, Carolina Sandoval, although limited in her personal use of print literacy, was the able conductor of her own
family literacy network, utilizing her more schooled children to perform needed literacy tasks, and even stepping outside family boundaries to invite Ms. Luna to assist in the task of keeping tabs on Juanito’s homework quality and completion (Chapter 6). But Ms. Luna, from her vantage point within the classroom, did not hold this view of a capable Carolina. While Ms. Luna appeared to applaud Carolina’s “high standards” for her son, the teacher also referred to her in distant terms as “the mother”, just as Ms. Garza had referred to Lupe Machado. In addition, Ms. Luna characterized Carolina as someone who could “barely sign her name,” a phrase frequently heard in societal discourse that stereotypes the non-print literate. As a matter of fact, although Carolina Sandoval formed larger letters and more slowly and cautiously than most print literate adults, I had seen her sign her name in class many times. More importantly, once exposed to print in the classroom, Carolina proved to be among the fastest—and like her son, most improved—adult learners in Jefferson’s basic Spanish literacy classrooms. Ms. Luna, however, did not appear to view Carolina Sandoval as a capable “partner” in the orchestration of Juanito’s education, as much parent involvement literature so often urges (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2002; Swap, 1993). Rather, keying into authoritative discourses, echoing Bill Cosby as well as common societal views of the non-print literate, Ms. Luna seemed more attuned to parental stereotypes that helped her make sense of the difficult challenges she faced as the teacher of several English learners in a regimented program at a PI school.

3.3 Laura Barajas: Third-grade Teacher to Juanito Sandoval and Volunteer in Jefferson Parent Programs

Unlike Mss. Garza and Luna, both born in Mexico, Laura Barajas was born in the Silicon Valley. The youngest of four children of Mexican immigrant parents, Ms. Barajas had attended grade schools in Jefferson’s Silicon Valley School District, a local Catholic girls high school, and then Stanford University, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology. She later completed her teaching credential at San José State. Ms. Barajas had 10 years’ experience as a bilingual teacher.

The third grade teacher of Juanito Sandoval in the academic year before our interview, Ms. Barajas also differed from teachers Garza and Luna in terms of her long-term work with parents. She had served as a volunteer teacher and tutor in the Fundamental Spanish Literacy classes for parents two evenings a week during the school years of 2003 to 2005. Since then, Ms. Barajas had continued to act as a substitute teacher occasionally when Ernestina was ill or speaking before the City Council to request continued funding.

Much of our taped conversation, which took place in February of 2006 during the academic year in which the new principal had taken over, centered on Ms. Barajas’ perceptions of parents and parent involvement. At the same time, Ms. Barajas discussed at length issues regarding the increasingly test-based curriculum under NCLB: teaching and learning strategies geared toward test-taking, the movement away from the whole language curriculum to a scripted curriculum, experiments with focal students based on test scores, and strategies for schoolwide test score improvement. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on these details only as related to parents.

For Laura Barajas, the reasons for becoming a volunteer in Jefferson’s adult basic Spanish literacy program were both personal and professional. On a personal level, her father had recently passed away, so interacting with adults, some of whom were the age
of her father, brought comfort to her. On a professional level, Ms. Barajas had witnessed firsthand among her students’ parents their desire to learn:

At that point I’d been teaching for about 5 years, and there were many parents who couldn’t read, you know. And they’d come to conferences and they were always interested in some kind of help, you know. There were parents coming in, “Help me fill out this job application” and feeling very embarrassed about the inability. I mean, it just blows my mind that somebody could live, you know, 30 or 40 years and not know how to read. Because reading is so essential that uh…I admire people who navigate through their life without the ability, however I wanted to do something to help.

Parent teacher conferences, said Ms. Barajas, were an eye opener. So many parents, she said, couldn’t read the evaluations of their children’s performance, that entire conference periods were dedicated not merely to explaining such materials but actually reading them. Further, many parents seemed to view school as an unapproachable place:

I think school is intimidating to parents. I think um…it helps that […] the majority of our staff [both teachers and administrators] speak Spanish. The parents feel very comfortable coming in, but I think school can be very…scary. Um, either they didn’t have a good experience with school, or they have no experience with school, or there is this, you know, “la maestra” idea…of you know, this teacher as an exalted, don’t bother them kind of thing, and you only come in when it’s something bad or there is a problem…I think…just the bottom line is, it’s really intimidating for parents. I mean, it, it would be, and especially if they can’t read and um, you know, just in terms of conferencing, just that, that I don’t think it’s shame, but just parents who are very humildes [humble, or low-income]. You know, and they come in and they’ll be kind of embarrassed or, or wanting forgiveness for not being able to do more, or for not being able to participate more.

Ms. Barajas, then, more so than Ms. Garza or Luna, tended to sympathize with parents, sensing, not the lack of interest that Ms. Garza assumed or the lack of parenting skills that Ms. Luna perceived, but rather a sense of unworthiness on the part of parents who had had little or no access to formal schooling. Note, however, that in contrast to Ernestina Olmedo, who so often praised parents—whether or not they were print literate—for their wisdom, verbal expression, and resilience, Laura Barajas appeared to view many parents as limited in their capacity to contribute to their children’s formal education, citing their “not being able to participate more.” In fact, Ms. Barajas was not entirely convinced that parent participation is as important as much of the parent involvement literature frequently claims:

I think currently in terms of the school culture and […] in terms of like recent research studies, for whatever side of the argument you want to support…um… parent participation…it is important but I can’t, as an educator, I can’t control parent edu…. participation, so I need to do everything I can as a teacher to take care of my students’ needs in class. So it is not going to be, you know, dependent on homework, or the parent sitting down and reading with them, or if the parent is checking the homework, or in any way interacting with their child because I can’t control that.
So, the education is going to come from me and what I do in the classroom. That’s kind of the current trend in research that’s being presented to us as teachers.

Similar to Ms. Luna, Ms. Barajas’ philosophy led her to focus on what she herself could control—classroom instruction—except that in addition, Laura Barajas appeared to exempt parents from performing school-related tasks in the home. Rather, she focused on her responsibility as a teacher. Still, this left her feeling conflicted:

I am kind of torn, because on the one hand, yes, they [parents] totally need to be involved. But on the other hand, you know, there is going to be that kid whose parents are working night and day to make ends meet because they are so poor, who can’t be involved, and there is no reason why that child should not have the same opportunities as the child whose parents are totally involved. But I mean, it’s very apparent immediately when parents are involved and when they’re not.

Ms. Barajas defined parent involvement, in fact, beginning with the basics of food, clothing, hygiene, and shelter, echoing the mothers, who included such material support as a category of parent involvement. In addition, conflicting with, or at least refining her statement above, Laura also included homework checking:

Ali: What, what is for you involvement? How do, how would you define it?
Ms. Barajas: Yeah, well, that’s just it, you know [...] you know they [children] need to feel safe, they need to have shelter, they need to have, um... food like all of their needs, certain needs need to be met [...] In terms of parent involvement, for me, important parent involvement is, feeding your child before they come to school, making sure your child is clean, um... checking their homework to see that they have completed it—not [necessarily] checking it to see that it is correct—making your child have discipline, sit down, do your work um... and taking them possibly to the library, you know, very basic parent involvement.

Ms. Barajas, although her expectations of parents appeared contextualized in terms of exemption rather than praise, shared some expectations with those of the mothers themselves. In addition, differently from Ms. Garza, Laura Barajas did not harbor hopes that parental participation in certain school programs could quickly help improve children’s classroom performance or test scores. Rather, Ms. Barajas, similarly focused as her fellow teachers on standardized testing, looked, as had Principal Serrano, to curricular adjustments that she herself could implement.

In fact, as far as parent involvement within the classroom itself was concerned, for Ms. Barajas, this was a luxury she could not afford, in part due to the test-based focus of the curriculum. In-class parent participation, she felt, would require extra time and effort on her part to prepare parents to take on certain tasks. The current test-driven environment, she said, left no time for special activities that might include parents. Indeed, Ms. Barajas acknowledged that she had parents who wanted to help within the classroom, but the curriculum simply did not allow for ‘extras’ like activities with parents:

Parent involvement in terms of coming into my classroom and working with kids, that would be awesome. It rarely happens, on the one hand, because I’m... disorganized, you know [laughing], and it takes a lot of effort to get a group of parents in-
involved, you know, and I…am so busy with what I do in class that that parent component gets neglected a lot. Um…very often too, though, and just the way the, the environment, not the environment the um…I can’t think of the word…but, but the way education is right now, we are so test, testing and scores-based that while on the one hand I think it would be very rich to bring parents in and, and value what they can offer be it, you know, artesanas [arts and crafts], or telling stories, or sitting with the child and listening to them read…I do not have time for that. Because I have so much curriculum that I need to move through that that’s like one more thing, you know, because I have parents who want to help.

Thus, although many parents—print literate and non-print literate alike—had cultivated classroom experience within Dr. Olmedo’s literature circles, literacy classes, and Readers Club, and therefore might have enhanced Ms. Barajas’ classroom, Ms. Barajas didn’t view her students’ parents that way:

When I need to spend a lot of time to prepare them [parents] to help me, that is not helpful. Because they don’t come with the skills to take a reading group and go sit over there and go through these questions and, you know…well, we don’t do that in my classroom but you know…, yeah, even something like that, I mean uh…that is not going to happen because I am not getting that caliber of parent, con todo respeto [with all due respect]. I mean, it is just not happening that way.

Ms. Barajas’ use of the phrase “con todo respeto” is emblematic of her conflicted view of parent participation. While she respected Jefferson parents, their presence did not seem entirely useful beyond help with class parties and secretarial tasks. Still, had less scholastically experienced parents sought to help in the classroom, she could have requested that they first gain some experience in the classes of Ernestina Olmedo. But this would have required extra time and organization on Laura Barajas’ part, which she currently needed to invest in improving children’s test scores; coordinating parents according to their particular talents, skills, and strengths would have meant extra work on the part of any teacher, not to mention precious time out of the curricular day.

At the same time, however, Ms. Barajas’ compared the parent involvement activities of her students’ parents with those of some of her middle class friends:

So my parental involvement tends to be, you know, they come for the class parties, they’ll pass, you know, postres [desserts] or the drinks, they’ll help clean up […] Some come in and fill out papers for me, some will correct things, you know, but it is not involvement like my friends are involved in their child’s education, because it’s a different set of people, you know, where they are the art docents and they come in and teach about [Catalan abstract painter Joan] Miró once, once a month to the entire class and do the whole project. I am like, “You do what?” you know, because that is just so different from my experience with my parents.

In comparison to her image of the educated, middle class mother who doubles as an art docent and virtual substitute teacher, most Jefferson parents, for Ms. Barajas, could not make a significant contribution to her classroom. Unlike Ms. Garza, who was thrilled with her in-class parent volunteer, Ms. Barajas seemed to feel that without considerable education and specific expertise, parents in a test-centered curriculum were of little value. In addition, Ms. Barajas’ words place greater value on the fine art of Joan Miró than the
popular artesanías that her parents might have presented, belying a middle class value likewise present in the prescriptive parent involvement literature (cf. Snow et al., 1991). If Ms. Barajas is right that a test-centered curriculum renders parents virtually useless for classroom instruction, I would argue, that this is the case no matter parents’ background or expertise. Whether teaching artesanías or fine art, leading a book group or organizing a party, it would seem that focusing on test preparation and test taking could eliminate a significant amount of enrichment, not to mention interest, from the curriculum. Clearly, although she had worked with and respected Jefferson parents, they did not seem essential to Ms. Barajas in dealing with the challenges of teaching at a PI school.

3.4 Summary of Teacher Interviews

It should be reinforced that the data presented about the three teachers in this chapter, differently from previous chapters, was excerpted mainly from three one-hour interviews and less from the larger, three-year ethnographic study. In hindsight, more attention to the teachers of focal children, in the classroom on an ongoing basis, could have provided greater insight into the teachers’ overall negative view of parents. Without doubt, however, the interviews demonstrate that the focus on standardized testing and scores influenced each teacher’s view of parents’ utility. At the same time, issues of social class may likely have been at play. Ms. Garza’s belief that parents didn’t enroll their children in pre-school due to mere lack of interest, Ms. Luna’s contention that parents were too focused on video games and sneakers, and Ms. Barajas’ view that fine art docents were more effective parent participants than her students’ parents, likely point to insensitivities inherent in the middle class. While all of these women came from poor or working class backgrounds, by virtue of their formal education, they are rendered middle class, and potentially opinionated as a result, by the very education that was supposed to open their minds. In all fairness, as noted in Chapter 1, I myself had displayed similar intolerance to certain immigrants of my own ethnic community. In the final section of this chapter, then, I consider the issue of the greater society’s authoritative discourses, which we often accept unquestioningly, reinforcing social class barriers and the tendency to stereotype even within ethnic communities.

4. Discursal Subtexts: Generalized Views of Parents, Bill Cosby and the Tennis Shoes

Notions of societal mythmaking (Moreno & Valencia, 2002) and of authoritative versus internally persuasive discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) provide a useful lens for examining some of the conflicting views regarding parent participation as presented by Jefferson teachers and administrators. It so happened that administrators in this study, namely, Parent Coordinator Ernestina Olmedo, Principal Julio Serrano, and former principal Andy Molina, expressed beliefs in mutual respect, the school-as-community, and in family-school-community collaboration as vital to the success for Jefferson School. I do not mean to suggest that this is common feature of all school administrators, however. Certainly, Olmedo, Serrano, and Molina had consistently and tirelessly sought parents out and welcomed them into the school in a variety of ways.

The teachers interviewed, however, articulated a contrasting agenda. Under the guidance of a new principal, NCLB mandates, continuing state standards, and Jefferson’s recent designation as a PI school, the teachers were particularly focused on students’ performance at grade level as measured by a battery of local, state, and federal tests, admin-
istered minimally every eight weeks. Thus, while the administrators interviewed saw parent participation as vital to the school, teachers held a decidedly different set of goals that rendered parents superfluous at best and impedimental at worst.

At the same time, teachers spent much less time with parents, and, as predicted by Epstein (2001), tended to express more stereotypical views about them. Stereotypes, however, are not produced in a vacuum but rather emerge from a society’s authoritative discourses. In this case, some authoritative discourses sprang from NCLB and other sources of accountability measures that rendered testing the most important activity in schools. Other authoritative discourses emerged, as it were, from the mouths of authorities themselves, such as comedian Bill Cosby, who holds a doctorate in education. Both Valdés (1996) and Zentella (2005a) similarly point to the damaging comments of the nation’s first Latino Education Secretary, Lauro Cavazos, who, while in office, cast blame on Latino parents for the comparatively high dropout rate of their children—40% at the time—saying that Latina and Latino parents had “lost” their culture’s traditional valuing of education (Suro, 1990). As further noted by Zentella (2005a), prominent Latina Linda Chavez, former executive director of U.S. English, has similarly derided Latin@ parents for their supposed lack of interest in their children’s education (see Chavez, 2000). But as predicted by Bakhtin (1981) and affirmed by Valdés (1996), such authoritative discourses as produced by the likes of Cavazos, Chavez, or Cosby do not originate with the authorities themselves; rather such discourses self-perpetuate, reverberating in the mass media the common and unquestioned perceptions of mainstream society. Cavazos, according to Valdés,

…simply echoed what has been generally believed by many American educators to be true….These educators—because they have neither the experience nor the information that might help them make sense of the lives of people different from themselves—feel both angry and indignant at the seeming indifference of Mexican-origin parents. (1996:33)

In short, Ms. Garza and Luna, without sufficient in-depth information as to parents’ efforts and challenges in behalf of their children’s education, tended to see parents in a stereotypic light that merely reiterated our society’s authoritative discourses. Ms. Barajas, in contrast, with extended access to parents through her volunteer work in the Jefferson’s basic Spanish literacy classes, saw parents more sympathetically, understanding some of their efforts and challenges, yet still adhering to middle class values that place greater importance on so-called fine art than popular art. At the same time, for both Ms. Luna and Ms. Barajas, authoritative discourses regarding the non-print literate as people who can ‘barely sign their names’ and who can do little to support their children’s education were also at play. But beginning reader Carolina Sandoval, despite her relative inaccess to print, orchestrated her family’s literacy network in designating various print literacy tasks among her children (Chapter 5). Had Ms. Luna or Barajas seen a mother like Carolina in action at home, this might have altered their stereotypic views of the non-print literate as, in Ms. Barajas’ words, “not being able to do more.”

But Jefferson administrators, differently from the teachers interviewed, had more frequent access to parents. Principal Serrano, when he himself was a teacher, had undertaken a series of home visits that opened his eyes’ to children’s living conditions and
families’ struggles, and Dr. Olmedo and Mr. Molina likewise had engaged in much community work and connected with parents throughout their careers. The administrators interviewed did not bend to authoritative discourses but rather to their internally persuasive discourses (Bakhtin, 1981), which challenged conventional “wisdom” and stereotypes. Among parents, Ernestina frequently shared stories from her life and from literature that validated her experiences as an immigrant. She in turn validated the parents’ experiences, giving them a generative space to dialogue around their life histories, engage with literacy, and in the process, reconfirm their identities and their own internally persuasive discourses. In sum, Ernestina, Julio, and Andy, unlike the teachers but rather like the framework drawn up in Chapter 2, could see parents from a central location, not distanced, marginalized, or rendered invisible by societal blindness.
Chapter 8: Conclusion. *Tocando puertas*

*I compare my situation then to a man who is drowning. A man who is drowning uses the water, the very substance that threatens his life, to save himself.*

—Francisco Jiménez

1. Introduction

Francisco Jiménez’ words above point to the thrust of Chapter 7, that what seems a societal contrast to one person, such as the dangerous waters of perceived cultural difference that threaten to drown the immigrant newcomer, may actually prove to be a convergence, a cultural connection or strength, when perceived from an alternate perspective. In this chapter, I first describe the context surrounding Jiménez’ words and the event that led me to them, the graduation of Elda Machado from Del Valle Community College.

1.1 Elda’s Graduation

In June of 2008, I received an unexpected email. Knowing that I worked at Stanford University, Elda Machado had looked me up on Stanford’s website to invite me to her graduation from Del Valle Community College. Her mother, Elda explained, had lost her cell phone and my contact information along with it. But savvy in the ways of college websites, Elda found me. In her invitation, she pointed out that none other than Francisco Jiménez, the Santa Clara University professor whose stories we had so often read in Ernestina’s classes, would be the keynote speaker. Of course I gladly accepted her invitation.

When I arrived, I caught sight of Elda in a long line of graduates. Although only about 5 feet tall, Elda stood out, adorned with the gold tassels of an honors student. Graduating with an associate’s degree in behavioral sciences, Elda would go on to major in anthropology at the state university closest to her family’s home. It would not be UCLA, as she had originally hoped; the family finances dictated that she live at home while studying.

Shortly after my arrival, Lupe and Diego joined me along with their children Benjamin and Sophie, Lupe’s mother, and other relatives. They brought a video camera to film the event. Only Elda’s younger sister, Paloma, was absent; she was attending the annual Shakespeare festival in Ashland, Oregon along with a group from SVC Prep. Paloma was now also a student at Del Valle, majoring in administration of justice, but because she’d been unable to attend SVC’s fieldtrip to the Shakespeare festival the year before, they invited her back to attend the following year.

In his keynote address, ¹ Professor Jiménez began by congratulating the graduates and, not coincidentally, by thanking parents and other family members for their support. He then went on to describe his own educational experiences. He had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border with his family, without documentation, when just a small boy. Once in the U.S., they toiled together in the fields as a migrant family. Later, his family was able to acquire legal residency. In high school, Francisco and his older brother helped the family make ends meet by working as janitors 35 hours per week. After high school, his dream of attending college became reality because, as Dr. Jiménez modestly put it, Santa Clara University “took a chance” (Jiménez, 2008) and offered him a scholarship despite
“below average” (Jiménez, 2008) SAT scores in English. As a college freshman, Jiménez, reflecting a dominant societal discourse, worried that he lacked the social, economic, and cultural capital to compete with his fellow students. He realized, however, that he possessed stores of resilience and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2006) that would stand him in good stead:

My first year in college was a challenge. I quickly discovered that my migrant experiences were both an obstacle and a blessing. They were an obstacle to the extent that I did not have the social, economic, and educational experiences most of my classmates enjoyed. However, they were a blessing because they served as a constant reminder of how fortunate I was to be in college. Those experiences convinced me that I should do everything within my power to forge ahead in my studies and not give up.

I compare my situation then to a man who is drowning. A man who is drowning uses the water, the very substance that threatens his life, to save himself.

So I used poverty and those experiences that initially pulled me down to boost myself up. Whenever I felt discouraged, I would jot down recollections about my childhood.

Later on, I began to write systematically and purposefully about my past experiences. I wanted to document the lives of many migrant families like my own who had suffered and continued to suffer injustices and whose lives and noble work were for the most part invisible. My formal college education had given me the context for understanding injustice and the educational tools to do something about it.

Now, just as my college education has helped me to fulfill my professional and personal life, it has called on me to contribute to the common good through my teaching and writing. (Jiménez, 2008, emphasis added)

Professor Jiménez went on to encourage the Del Valle graduates to do the same. Reflecting the view of focal mamá Alma Rivera and other mamás that education is most valuable when employed to serve others, he exhorted the graduates to put their education to use toward justice and the common good.

In addition, Jiménez confessed his self-doubt as to whether his outwardly modest background had sufficiently prepared him for college. His out-of-school education (cf. Hull and Schultz, 2001, 2003), such as his work in the fields and as a janitor, may admittedly have done little to boost the SAT scores, which, according to Jiménez, sagged a bit in English. But are high test scores the only ingredient for success in school?

In contrast to the measurement of “workable skills,” ostensibly represented in standardized test scores, computing the educación—the good character, persistence, resilience, and other assets—that Jiménez gained from his life experiences is something, by and large, that the bulk of the literature on parental influences and student achievement has not sought to measure. For that matter, this less visible activity and the experiential capital that comes with it is not something that the dominant society, at least with respect to schooling, has learned to sufficiently value. The work of migrants, in Jiménez’ own words, is invisible; and so are the migrants themselves. They are marginalized, as Kim-
berlé Clark would point out, on various intersecting levels, such as race, ethnicity, and/or gender, educational background, and socioeconomic and/or documentation status. As critical race theorists such as Clark have explained, our ways of seeing and not seeing, of recognizing and not recognizing, emerge in response to societal discourses, narratives that mythologize and pigeonhole people into limiting categories and subgroups, privileging certain experiences and forms of knowledge while rejecting others (Clark, 1995). And as Bourdieu points out, the societal subordination of certain groups (and subgroups or intersecting groups, such as women of color), and the tandem subordination of their associated forms of knowledge and other sorts of capital, against a backdrop of privileging others groups and *their* respective forms of knowledge/capital, only serves to reproduce societal structures, such as schools, that marginalize on the one hand while privileging on the other (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Yosso, 2006).

If there is a cycle that needs to be broken, then, it is not one of “illiteracy” or “lack of involvement” on the part of parents, as put forth by many researchers in family literacy and parental involvement. Rather, as demonstrated throughout this dissertation, it is a disinclination on the part of researchers, educators, and the larger society to look beyond superficial and prejudicial societal constructs, and to question society’s authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). As Yosso (2006) would ask, “Whose culture has capital?” Thus, if formal education and all of its emblems—diplomas, degrees, and certificates—are to represent substantial knowledge and experience, if a college degree is to amount to more than a social pedigree or mere marker of social and cultural capital, then researchers and educators are obliged to make visible the seemingly invisible, to recognize not only the obstacles but also the herculean efforts that undergird the ostensible modicum of agency (Holland *et al.*, 1998) exercised by humble people. We must look beyond the societal markers of prejudicial invisibility and see value where, perhaps by virtue of those pedigrees we possess, we could not see it before. If we do not, then students who deserve a solid education may be written off, along with their parents, blamed for insufficient attention to their children’s schooling.

This dissertation has been an attempt to make visible the invisible, to highlight the toils of people not unlike Professor Jiménez and his family, such as Lupe Machado, a third-generation California farmworker, still undocumented, who did all she could, despite enormous obstacles and scarce resources, to see her children succeed in school and go to college.

2. Revisiting the Research Questions

My research questions led to new insights about three central concepts:

1. literacy development at home and in parent classes (Chapter 5),
2. patterns of parental participation (Chapter 6), and
3. home-school relations (Chapter 7).

I now deal with each separately and in light of this study’s theoretical framework.
2.1 Literacy Development at Home and in Parent Classes

My research questions regarding the role of print literacy to parental involvement centered on parents’ varying levels of access to print and formal schooling, as well as parental perspectives on involvement, namely:

- What are parents’ ways with the printed word? What role does print literacy play in parents’ school involvement? Given that schools’ raison d’être is arguably print literacy, and that some parents have had limited access to formal schooling or print literacy or both, do parents view their participation differently, vis-à-vis the school, according to their ways with the printed word?
- How do school officials view parents with limited print literacy, and what are school officials’ expectations of these parents?

The following constructs proved useful in characterizing the parents’ ways with words as orchestrated through *family literacy networks*, anchored in the home but extended to the school through parent classes and other school contacts:

1. **Social networks**: literacy as a practice residing in relational networks composed of non-print literate and literate individuals alike (Fingeret, 1983; Guerra, 1998),
2. **Literacy exchanges**: family literacy and service exchanges based on individual members’ needs or fortes (Auerbach, 1989; Fingeret, 1983), and
3. “**Generative spaces**”: sites that allow for and encourage literacy development (Kalman, 2004, following Zboray, 1993).

Among the mothers involved in this study, varying levels of access to print literacy did not affect their level of interest and participation in their children’s schooling or the mothers’ own pursuit of lifelong learning. In each of the three families I encountered, the Sandoval, Galarzas, and Machado, family literacy networks had formed, spearheaded by *mamá*. All seven focal mothers, in fact, reported literacy practices indicative of family literacy networks: exchanges of print literacies and other services based on each network member’s individual strengths, all generated within the hub of the home. Mothers with less access to print, namely Carolina and Margarita, more frequently invoked the assistance of others, usually their children, for print-related needs, and in this sense, the structure of their family literacy network seemed more hierarchical. Thus, even though some might argue that these mothers needed their children’s help and were thus beholden to their children, I found that the mothers’ authoritative insistence upon their children’s aid was an indication that *mom* was in charge. Somewhat contrastingly, in the case of Lupe Machado, who had had six years of formal schooling, the family literacy network seemed at times less hierarchical, as when she and Elda exchanged information about good books they’d read in their respective classes, or more hierarchical, as when she directed her older daughters to aid the younger children with their homework in English. Similarly, a less hierarchical, more multilateral relation surfaced in the family of Rosa Anaya, who reported that her third-grader, Kathy, helped Rosa with English homework, while Rosa in
turn helped Kathy with homework in Spanish. Yet the hierarchical nature of the family literacy network reemerged in instances where Rosa directed Kathy to read in English to her preschool aged brother, Ernesto. Dozens of instances of such familial exchanges were reported by all of the mothers. No matter their individual ways with the printed word and access to print and to formal education, and probably by virtue of their presence in a print-saturated society, the mothers whose families I observed directed a system of complex relational exchanges. The other mothers likewise reported familial exchanges to serve their own and their respective families’ print literacy needs and interests. None of the mothers, then, were “illiterate” or “functionally illiterate” as characterized by popular, societal, or other authoritative discourses: even those who were novice readers and writers, like Carolina and Margarita, were agile, adept orchestrators of family networks, a role which required specific understandings about what needed to be done and who could best perform the task.

With respect to interaction with Jefferson School, once again, limited access to print did not limit the seven mothers’ interest or engagement. Carolina, for instance, specifically sought the aid of her son Juanito’s teacher, Ms. Luna, in monitoring the quality of his homework. As Carolina explained to Ms. Luna upon entering his fourth grade classroom, she saw to it that her son sat down and did his homework every day, but she sought out Ms. Luna to help ensure its quality and completion. Still, Ms. Luna did not put much stock in Carolina’s level of parental involvement. Although Ms. Luna acknowledged that Carolina had attended each back-to-school night, open house, and conference that year, she appeared to discount Carolina’s ability to support her son, invoking societal discourses of the non-print literate, saying that Carolina was “illiterate” and “barely able to sign her name,” and suggesting that there was little such a parent could do to support her children in school. But as noted, although Carolina’s individual access to print was limited, this did not limit her frequent insistence to her children that they read to her. As orchestrator of her family’s literacy network, although a novice reader and writer, the knowledge and networking Carolina had cultivated surrounding print was extensive. She formed a vibrant family literacy network and invited Ms. Luna to share in its workings. In fact, among school officials interviewed for this study, Ms. Luna’s reaction—that is, her acceptance of society’s authoritative discourse regarding the presumed incapacity of the non-print literate—was found only among school personnel who interacted with parents on an infrequent basis and who thus appeared to make sense of parents by “filling in the blanks” with societal stereotypes.

Here I reemphasize that within the hierarchical, hybridized, multidirectional, and sometimes multilateral nature of the family literacy network, the exchange of services did not always involve print (cf. Fingeret, 1983). Thus, Carolina provided the household with care and nutrition, and walked her son and granddaughter to school, and Margarita provided childcare and monetary assistance with tuition and books. These services did not involve print directly, but family members skilled with print were expected to lend a hand with needed print-related services at mom’s insistence. I do not suggest a quid pro quo here, but certainly all family members were expected to contribute whatever they could do well. And while mothers with limited print literacy experienced challenges, as expressed by Margarita in her frustration at not comprehending the bus system, at the same time they increasingly gained new understandings, including where they needed assistance and how to get it. It should come as no surprise that the home was a generative
space for literacy development even in homes where print was scarce. Although books were a generally unaffordable luxury, families engaged with print in other ways: gratefully accepting books offered as gifts, treasuring documents such as certificates of academic achievement and children’s schoolwork, and providing writing implements for young and old. Additionally, families took advantage of the local library, and mothers, non- and print literate alike, took their children there to check out books.

And like the homes I visited or that the mothers described to me, Jefferson School’s parent classes also served as hubs for literacy development. Parents at Jefferson contributed to the school, but the school gave back to them in kind with a generative space for Freirean-oriented self-actualization through lifelong learning, for interaction with print and with each other. It provided both development opportunities as well as respite for those parents enduring tough times.

The multifaceted nature of Jefferson’s parental involvement program and multiple efforts to minister to parents of varying backgrounds facilitated their access to involvement despite varying experience with print. Specifically, just as the mothers’ knowledge surrounding print did not necessarily reflect their personal skills with encoding or decoding print, linkages of family literacy to school involvement proved essentially to be knowledge-based, not skills-based, and so parent involvement was accessible to all parents regardless of their formal education or background with print. That is, “college knowledge” and others forms of understanding how schools and school systems work are a form of cultural capital that parents developed through activating social capital, often exercised while present on campus, whether to drop off a child or attend a parent function. Mothers tended to learn about opportunities for their families at school and in the community not through flyers or newsletters sent home but rather in talking directly to other parents or teachers, and through listening to announcements read at school gatherings, where parents socialized, supported each other, and gave testament to their own experiences. In terms of college knowledge, the mother who most demonstrated this, Lupe Machado, had benefitted from a series of specially designed parent workshops at SVC Prep. Such parent classes and workshops, at Jefferson and elsewhere, served as hubs for development of social capital as well as for literacy, knowledge about the workings of schooling in the U.S., and other forms of cultural capital.

It should be stressed that limited access to formal schooling or struggles to obtain it in their past did not, in contrast to suggestions in some parental involvement literature, render formal education less valued in the eyes of the mothers. Quite the contrary, those who had been denied access or who struggled to obtain formal education in childhood were that much more resolute in pursuing education for their children. I now turn to such patterns of involvement.

2.2 Patterns of Parental Participation

My questions surrounding parental participation emerged from an effort to overtly define the term, a step surprisingly omitted from most prescriptive and quantitative parent involvement research (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Fine, 1993; Graue et al., 2001). Likewise surprisingly neglected in the prescriptive and quantitative research has been the voice of parents. This lack of definition and skewed orientation thus undergird my initial questions, restated here:
What constitutes “parent participation” for the mothers, and how indeed do the women and their spouses participate? Do parents participate in conventionally recognized ways? Do they participate in other, less typically recognized ways? Do patterns of participation emerge?

What are parents’ understandings of their interactions with and activities at their children’s school? Do parents feel they gain or learn from some of these experiences? If so, in what ways?

The focal mothers in this study did indeed participate in their children’s formal education and educación at home, in a variety of ways, both conventionally recognized and at times overlooked in the prescriptive and quantitative literature. Table 8.1 restates the mothers’ typology of parental participation.

Table 8.1 The Mothers’ Typology of Parent Involvement Practices

| 1. Presence at school: i.e., on the school grounds, including attendance at school functions (e.g., assemblies, coffees, meetings, open houses, parent classes, and parent-teacher conferences), and general presence on campus before, during, or after school; |
| 2. Communication with and within the school: e.g., networking with other parents and with teachers and/or administrators; advocating for one’s children at school; |
| 3. Involvement in school and community activities: participation such as volunteering, engaging in political activities, and community organizing; |
| 4. Literacy support at home: employing or otherwise promoting literacy and numeracy at home; |
| 5. Material support: providing e.g., food, shelter, clothing, hygiene, transportation, school supplies, and enrollment in enrichment programs; providing enrichment activities outside of school; |
| 6. Moral support: e.g., encouraging children or keeping after them as needed; recognizing that different children need different kinds of support; reminding children to take advantage of the educational opportunities before them; |
| 7. Parental determination: seeking to give their children a better future; acting as perseverant, positive role models for their children. |

To begin with, mere presence on campus provided parents a venue in which to socialize, developing social capital that could in turn lead to the development of cultural capital. Thus, any form of presence on campus, not merely prescriptively recognized forms such as attendance at parent-teacher conferences, represented a kind of parent participation for the mothers. In a similar vein, communication not only with school officials but with other parents also counted as involvement, since networking with other parents, provided a great deal of information about the workings of the school and community and about local resources.

At home, support for literacy and numeracy were a part of normal household operations. And while not all mothers could “help” their children with homework, all enlisted
children to help their elders or siblings or both in literacy tasks, and likewise enlisted others (siblings or teachers) where needed to ensure the quality and completion of children’s homework.

In terms of involvement in school and community activities, while the mothers took part in conventional forms of participation, such as volunteering in the classroom or for the Readers Club, several were also engaged in less typically recognized ways, through involvement in the community booster group Activas en la Comunidad, or through forms of protest, sending letters to the governor and attending a public demonstration, at the behest of teachers, against school cutbacks.

Parent participation for the mothers also included both moral and material support in more expansive terms than generally found in the prescriptive and quantitative literatures. Material support included the most basic necessities, but not the “quiet, well-lit place to study” often invoked in the prescriptive literature. Among some families, even providing basic necessities such as food and shelter at times proved challenging. Moral support, meanwhile, included an array of actions less frequently visible to researchers and educators, such as encouraging, pressuring, or counseling children.

Finally, parents were highly resilient and determined to see their families succeed. They persevered though many struggles and in the process, modeled the value of determination for their children. Frequently, the mothers went the extra mile to overcome for their children whatever obstacles—funding, transportation, family duties, etc.—that had impeded the mothers’ own access to education.

In examining the mothers’ typology, recall Jeynes’ contention that “some of the most potent facets of parental involvement are some of the more subtle aspects of family support” (2005:262). The mothers’ inclusion of less visible forms of support, such as role modeling and providing moral support, is thus sustained by recent quantitative (as well as qualitative) research. The mothers’ focus on la educación—defined by Valdés, Zentella and others as an upbringing centered on good character, cooperation, generosity, and respect for others—may be less perceptible to some, but highly valuable to the mothers’ children. At the same time, the mothers’ more conventionally recognized support of formal education developed because they were expressly invited to join in the school community, as in the examples of Rosa and Helena, invited by their children’s pre-school teachers to volunteer in the classroom, or in the examples of the many parents in this study who credited Ernestina and Julio for their frequent invitations to parents to attend assemblies, coffees, and parent classes. Without such overt and, as at Jefferson, repeated invitations, it is reasonable to speculate that the mamás would not have set aside the cultural framework with which they had immigrated from Mexico, in which one tended not to volunteer or even enter inside a classroom. But even when participating in more “observable” ways—from attending parent classes to volunteering in the classroom to staffing the school store—the mothers rationalized this participation by coming back to la educación: whatever form their participation took, they said, ultimately set a good example for their children to emulate.

And as they were setting a good example, the mothers were also generating capital, both social and cultural, often at an exponential rate. Much social contact, whether with an administrator, teacher, or fellow parent, led to further networking in parent classes and at school events. Through these increasing interactions and within the generative space of Jefferson’s programs, even newly arrived parents strengthened their social networks. At
the same time, the fungibility of this increased social capital, as predicted by Bourdieu’s theory (1977, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), became manifest as greater cultural capital, not only in ways with print and school-based literacies, but in reading new worlds, such as the classroom, a sociocultural context previously unfamiliar to a mother like Carolina. The mothers adapted and activated various strategies—inquiring, sharing, networking—to understand these worlds and their components, strengthening family literacy networks in which needed or desired literacies and other forms of capital could be developed and activated. Carolina could be deemed by some as an ineffective parent in that she could not pick up the telephone and call her children’s school, yet she initiated personal contacts through her frequent presence on campus and employed her children, especially the older ones, as instrumental members of the family literacy network, when phone contact was needed. In a similar vein, Margarita could be discounted as a non-print literate mother who could not “help her children” in school, and yet she supported them by demonstrating resilience and providing economic support, two forms of capital that her children converted into cultural capital, pursuing their education at four-year institutions.

But if fungibility translated to exponential gains, it could also reverberate into snowballing losses. In contrast to Elda Machado and the Galarza daughters, all of whom graduated from community colleges and successfully transferred to Cal State universities as this study was closing, Maribel Sandoval, Carolina’s third child, dropped out of high school. Although I was never able to speak with Maribel to ask her precisely why she dropped out, it is likely that several factors, some of which related to issues of cultural and economic capital, came into play, namely, school stability and safety as well as family economics.

First, recall that Maribel attended three schools in three years upon immigrating to the U.S., first middle school, then high school, and then a different high school after her family was evicted from their home. At her new high school, influenced by norteño gangs known to loathe more recent arrivals like Maribel, she was beaten by a group of girls. After the beating, on behalf of the family I looked into SVC Prep, where the Machado children attended. Unfortunately, as a relatively recent arrival, a school official explained that Maribel’s English was not yet at grade level. Thus, even if she could get off the extensive wait list to attend SVC Prep, Maribel, now a sophomore, would have to repeat her freshman year. Since the girls who had beaten Maribel had reportedly been expelled, her parents thought she should stick it out at her current school. But while Maribel was having a tough time at school, things were worsening economically both at home and in the U.S. as a whole. Juan Sandoval, who had enjoyed steady, well-paid work as a bricklayer for five years, had had no work for several months. At the end of Maribel’s junior year, he decided to return with his family to Mexico. But by this time the older Sandoval children, Soledad, her brother Lucas, and husband Eduardo, had adapted to U.S. life sufficiently that they wanted to stay. In addition, Soledad was expecting her third (and she told me, last) child. Because her older siblings would be staying in the U.S., then, Maribel’s parents allowed her to remain with them in order to finish her senior year in high school. Carolina and Juan returned to Mexico with only their youngest child, Juanito, who by this time was in middle school. Once her parents left the country, however, Maribel dropped out of school and went to work full time at a bakery to help support the family that remained in the U.S. Her parents were dismayed but had no resources
to return to the U.S., whether to reason with Maribel or see their newest grandchild. In short, cultural and economic capital, such as access to a safe, unchanging school environment and to sufficient language resources, namely English, may have factored into Maribel’s ability to stay in school. At the same time, economic factors destabilized the family structure, permitting Maribel to make an apparently rash decision for her future, though contributing to her family’s economic health, at least in the short term.

Reading the new world, then, or even just surviving it, could be a daunting process. At best it could engender an occasional misunderstanding. At worst, the new world presented all manner of hardship, from joblessness to homelessness, and health problems to hunger. Fortunately for many of the parents in this study, sympathetic school officials and parent programs provided generative spaces to ease the reading of new world and sometimes even provide respite from it. This allowed the mamás to act agentively as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the school community to share their humanity and shed at least the emotional burden, if not the material challenges, they courageously faced. This participation was part of an overall process of ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981) and making sense of their world, weighing the value of its various discourses, whether authoritative or internally persuasive (Bakhtin, 1981), using this process to help them survive and thrive.

2.3 Home-school Relations

While a good deal of home-school literature has examined the home from the perspective of the school, this study sought a more evenly oriented perspective. When looking at parental involvement, it focused mainly on parental views and practices, and when looking at schools, it asked questions primarily centered on school officials’ actions, namely:

- What efforts does Jefferson Elementary take to reach out to parents, and how do parents respond? Do school officials acknowledge and support parents’ efforts? If so, in what ways?
- What are the school’s expectations of parents, and how do school officials communicate these expectations? What are parents’ understandings of the school’s expectations?

In addressing these questions, I’ll first note that Jefferson’s efforts to reach out to parents were, on the whole, impressive. To begin with, the parental programs’ Freirean orientation, appealing to the fundamental human need for self-actualization, provided not only a generative space for literacy development but also an opportunity for parents to use literature—and each other—to share and reflect upon their lives. This effort to minister to parents’ humanity not for literacy’s sake but rather through literacy, was the cornerstone of la maestra Ernestina Olmedo’s execution of Freirean pedagogy, and it differed dramatically from the skills-oriented parental programming, which Ernestina patently rejected, generally reflected in the prescriptive literature. In addition, rather than assume, as in decades past, that immigrant parents were undereducated folk in need of proper schooling and acculturation, the Jefferson program accepted parents at face value and, more importantly, acknowledged their wisdom and requested their input to continuously refine the parent curriculum. Moreover, as part of this humanizing orientation, the
program was highly elaborated, offering native language literacy for parents from a variety of backgrounds with print, as well as instruction in English at different levels, in learning strategies to use at home with children, and also providing a variety of opportunities to interact with print, with children, and with each other.

At the same time, the program enjoyed enthusiastic support from administrators like Principal Julio Serrano and former principal Andy Molina, who empathized with parents. Not only did Serrano evince a deep respect for his own mother, a farmworker and single mom, but also, back in his teaching days, he had visited the homes of local families and witnessed parents’ struggles. He demonstrated his support for parents by greeting them in front of school each morning and inviting them to daily assemblies on the blacktop, by participating in Tuesday morning coffees, and by delivering congratulatory remarks to parents at every convivencia. Finally, if Dr. Olmedo’s approach honed in on “whole parent,” then Mr. Serrano’s focused the “whole school,” envisioning the school both as a community in itself as well as an integral facet of the broader community. As such, he cultivated relationships for Jefferson with everyone from the City Council and Rotary Club to the local museum and library, and most of all, with parents, whom he saw as integral to the functioning of the school. Serrano’s predecessor, Andy Molina, still active in the Jefferson School and community, likewise supported this philosophy of respect and empathy for parents as part of a comprehensive vision of school as community. Molina had turned Jefferson School around in the 1990s from a gang-threatened school to a safe one using a decidedly community-based approach. In short, these Jefferson administrators—Olmedo, Serrano, and Molina—expressed their deep respect for parents and sought to integrate them into the functioning of the school. Parents responded in kind, frequently citing their entrée into Jefferson programs as an invitation from one of these administrators, and continuing to participate on the Jefferson campus.

But seasons change and so do principals. I was never able to determine precisely why Mr. Serrano was transferred to another school in the District, but a new principal, ushered in during the final year of this study, appeared to discount the utility of parents. Rather, focused on raising children’s standardized test scores, the new principal fixed her gaze on classroom strategies. At the same time, she cut Ernestina’s hours with parents and shifted her to reading with children; changed the “Coffees with the Principal” to “Parent Coffees,” saying she was too busy to attend; and posted the names and test scores, on a colorful mural outside the school library, of children who achieved basic, proficient, or advanced scores on state standardized tests.

When I interviewed teachers in the final year of this study, they reflected the new principal’s emphasis on standardized test scores, which in turn colored their view of parents. Laura Barajas, for instance, the third-grade teacher to Juanito Sandoval who had also volunteered as a maestra in the parent program in earlier years, seemed almost to write parents off. On the one hand, the test-based curriculum, she said, left little time to incorporate parents in the classroom. At the same time, parent participation was out of her control:

I need to do everything I can as a teacher to take care of my students’ needs in class, so it is not going to be, you know, dependent on homework, or the parent sitting down and reading with them, or […] checking the homework, or in any way interacting with their child because I can’t control that. So the
education is going to come from me and what I do in the classroom. That’s kind of the current trend in research that’s being presented to us as teachers.

While Ms. Barajas’ focus on her own responsibilities is admirable, the research trend she points to is disheartening, in that it appears to assume that parents by and large can do little to support their children. As we have seen, however, parents provide a great deal of moral and material support for their children’s education. Although it may not unequivocally translate into rising test scores, just the same, parental participation should be acknowledged and valued in all of its forms.

But if the authoritative discourses prevalent in Ms. Barajas’ view emanated in large part from recent research, for Celia Luna, fourth grade teacher to Juanito Sandoval, they seemed to arise as well from more widely held societal stereotypes, specifically those surrounding the non-print literate and the poor. Thus, although Ms. Luna also stated that “I can’t control the experiences kids come with,” she additionally referred to Carolina as “illiterate” and “barely able to sign her name,” essentially discounting, like Laura Barajas’, a parent’s ability to help her child succeed in school. Yet Carolina frequently insisted that her children read to her and likewise initiated contact with Ms. Luna to help monitor Juanito’s homework and progress in English. Yet Ms. Luna depicted Jefferson parents generally as “simple-minded” and materialistic, buying their children “Nintendos” and “expensive tennis shoes.”

Finally, Josefina Garza, first-grade teacher to Sophie Machado, similarly wrote off Lupe and Diego Machado, Sophie’s parents. Not realizing that the family had suffered a sudden eviction, and not able to witness the herculean efforts of Lupe and Diego to support their children and keep them in school while homeless, Ms. Garza assumed the family separation was incurred by a divorce squabble, which in turn had led Sophie to act out in class. Clearly, then, the teachers were right to say that they could not control the experiences their students brought to the classroom. At the same time, the teachers’ tendency to assume the worst about parents left them clearly frustrated and even at times angry at parents for their presumed absenteeism. Such a parent-teacher relationship of course could not be productive for children.

Just what was at the heart of these highly divergent perceptions between administrators Olmedo, Serrano and Molina, on the one hand, versus teachers Barajas, Luna, and Garza on the other? Certainly the arrival of a new principal had made an indelible mark. At the same time, however, if teachers were highly focused on the classroom and student performance, the parent program was highly focused on parents and children. There was no component to the parent program that systematically connected parents to teachers. Other than the traditional open houses and parent-teacher conferences, unrelated to the parent program, Jefferson had no mechanism for connecting parents and teachers. Thus, only the administrators, who enjoyed regular and sustained contact with parents, expressed a broad appreciation for parental involvement efforts, this despite the similar backgrounds of both groups, administrators and teachers, as bilingual first- and second-generation Mexican-Americans.

2.4 Lives through the lenses of theoretical constructs

Social theories, such as those of Bourdieu versus Coleman, can be interpreted to predict outcomes like those described in this dissertation. Thus, Coleman’s (1988) theory
of social capital might have predicted Maribel’s dropping out of high school, based on the family’s move due to eviction and her attendance at three schools in three years. But Coleman’s theory, while it may allow for familial structural influences, such as Maribel’s parents’ return to Mexico due to an economic downturn (decreased financial capital), cannot help us understand issues of the school environment, such as the impact of being threatened and beaten up. Nor can Coleman’s theory explain that the circumstances of school transfers were beyond the family’s control. Bourdieu’s theory, however, in considering the field of interaction, allows us to view a broader spectrum in which family, school, and community play multiple roles, instead of focusing only on parents and family.

Similarly, recall that Eloisa Galarza, at a four-year institution by the time this study ended, had also dropped out of high school. Her school transfers were due to actions taken by administrators. Her family didn’t move. Rather, bused and shifted to various primary and secondary schools, Eloisa ultimately dropped out in frustration. Still, one could argue, where were her parents during this process? Eloisa herself lamented that her parents seemed unable to advocate for her. In fact, it is likely that if they couldn’t, it was in part because they didn’t view that as their place. As we have seen, parents who visibly participated in their children’s schooling, aside from the behind-the-scenes support given at home, tended to do so only when insistently invited. Coming from a background in Mexico in which school had been inaccessible to many parents as children, and in which parents in schools were largely seen but not heard, parents needed to be told—convincingly—that their role in U.S. schools would be different. Only through such invitations to interact did parents gain a feel for the rules of the game. And beyond initial invitations, it was through sustained programs that parents cultivated the social and cultural capital necessary to at times enact that modicum of agency, as when parents like Carolina, Rosa and Helena sought to discuss their children’s progress in impromptu meetings with their children’s teachers. It is reasonable to speculate that, had Margarita, Eloisa’s mother, had access to similar parent programming while her children were still in primary or secondary school, Margarita, too, could have found it within herself to enact a modicum of agency and advocate for her daughter.

But beyond such speculation, it is interesting to note that while Coleman’s theory, based on school transfers, at least minimally anticipates Maribel’s and Eloisa’s dropping out, it does not predict that Eloisa’s resilience, arguably learned from her mother, would lead her back to school. If researchers and educators wish to powerfully account for and support student success, they would do well to heed Yosso’s advice to appreciate capital—resilience, aspirational, familial, etc.—in all its forms.

3. Conclusion: *Tocando puertas*, Creating Visibility between Parents and Schools

I conclude by invoking the words of the incredibly resilient Alma Rivera, who despite a life of hardship spoke of tocando puertas, of knocking on doors, until someone would listen and help. Her optimism inspires me to suggest possibilities for further research as well as curricular modifications.

In terms of research, more ethnographic studies that attempt to delineate parental perspectives, especially as illuminated by parents’ cultural and historical trajectories (cf. Hidalgo, 1998), are needed if we are to make more visible the many ways in which parents “invisibly” aid their children. Likewise, more quantitative studies such as that of
Jeynes (2005) that seek to understand those “invisible” parental practices and their links to student success could also go a long way to helping educators and researchers better understand the contributions of parents. Further, both qualitative and quantitative studies should seek to examine the possible effects of intersectionality as described by Kimberlé Clark (1995), taking into consideration societal views that subordinate groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, language, and other features of societal marginalization, again with the aim of discerning the parental efforts, from the ostensible modicum of agency to the herculean efforts that sometimes lie beneath the surface.

In terms of curricular modifications to parental programming, certainly more programs revisiting a humanizing, Freirean pedagogy could provide parents with the safe haven necessary to advance in lifelong learning, discern the rules of the game, and deal with complicated lives. Too frequently Freirean curricula are discounted in the U.S. as overly politicized. Such a view, however, fails to acknowledge the essential problem posed by Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1993 [1970]), that of “humanization.” Programs must seek to humanize parents, not utilize, demonize, operationalize, or otherwise pigeonhole them into limiting roles that fail to appreciate their essential human value and need for human development.

At the same time, parent programs must seek to connect parents with teachers. González, Moll, and Amanti (2005), for instance, describe a teacher education program in which teachers volunteer to train and act as community ethnographers, visiting the families of three of their students and interviewing family members in the home, exploring families’ histories, household practices, parenting views, and funds of knowledge. Teachers and researchers then share their findings in study groups. In this program, teachers take on the role of learners and researchers, encouraging

a shift from a ‘deficit view’ of ‘linguistically and culturally diverse’ students, to a positive view that considers a wealth of household knowledge that is too often overlooked, with little or no connection for the child in the classroom. (2005:185)

Such programs could benefit not only trained teachers but also teachers-in-training. While general home visits may help teachers at least appreciate the difficult living conditions some families face, as in the case of Julio Serrano when he began his teaching career, part of the precise value of the program cited by González and colleagues is that it highlights not parental obstacles but rather assets.

As a final note, I return to my roots as a language teacher, and also to my initial evening as an ethnographer, in a parent literacy class at Jefferson School for the first time. It was then that I met Margarita, angry, she told me, at being “kicked out” of a public ESL class for not knowing how to read and write in her native language. Because contemporary language teaching methods frequently rely on print, non-print literate adults like Margarita have found themselves either marginalized in ESL classes or even turned away. Rather than relying on time-honored aural-oral methodologies in classes with parents unaccustomed to print, deficit perspectives, stigmatizing, and narrow conceptualizations of language learning appear to be at play, limiting access to learning, while mirroring and perpetuating societal divisions between haves and have-nots. If our pedagogies are often imperfect, it is because they too often reflect the injustices we perpetuate in so-
ciety. It is my fervent hope that with this dissertation, I’ve helped, exerting at least a modicum of agency, to elucidate and ultimately dispel a few of those wrongs.

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