

Exploring Concepts of Latina/o Parental Involvement in a Rural Setting

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Abstract

This qualitative study utilizes critical participatory action research and critical race theory to understand views on parent involvement from the perspectives of Latina/o parents formally trained through a Latina/o leadership organization and elementary school administrators in a rural community. The guiding questions for this study were, how do elementary school administrators and a group of Latina/o leaders in the Valley School District (VSD), a rural school setting, define parental involvement? And, what are the implications for future school-home collaboration?

Once data were analyzed, a round table discussion with both groups was organized to establish dialogue focused on parental involvement from Latina/os in order to positively impact student achievement. Findings revealed three major themes. First, Latina/o parents tend to view effective parent involvement as primarily home-based interactions, but view input from educators as critical to supporting their children. Second, school administrators view parent involvement as being mainly based in the school setting, however they are shifting their definition to include non-traditional views. Third, while a variety of perspectives were presented about the role culture plays in the perceived lack of Latina/o parent involvement, the majority of Latina/o parents agreed that a factor barring involvement was the challenges of living in a rural setting and a mountain resort community.

Keywords: parent involvement, Latina/os, rural, community

Introduction

In our work as educators living and practicing in a western state, we have witnessed discrepancies in student achievement amongst Latina/o students and inequalities in parent participation that demand further investigation. As teacher-researchers in the Valley School District (VSD), we are committed to applied research using the cyclical nature of research and action to explore how educators and a group of Latina/o community leaders in a rural mountain resort town construct and operationalize the concept of parent involvement.

The United States is in the middle of a major demographic shift. As diversity across the nation increases, so too will the diversity of our schools. According to Dotson-Blake (2010), Latina/o students enrolled in K-12 currently comprise 19.5% of the nation's student population. Our state, like other rural states in middle America, is becoming more diverse. In fact, according to the state's chief economist, Latina/os are the only population growing in our state. Whereas much of the research focused on parental involvement has been collected in urban areas, there is a paucity of literature on the topic generated from Latina/os living in rural spaces (Brilliant, 2001; Curry, Jean-Marie, & Adams, 2016; Frew, Zhou, Duran, Kwok, & Benz, 2013; Hindman, Skibbe, & Morrison, 2013; Ishimaru, 2014; Kwan & Wong, 2016; McClain, 2010; Portwood, Brooks-Nelson, & Schoeneberger, 2015; Sanders, 2012; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). In part, our study responded to the call for practice-embedded research, conducted by those living and working with Latina/o populations in rural areas.

Our guiding questions for this study were as follows: (a) how do elementary school administrators and a group of Latina/o leaders in the rural school setting define parent involvement and (b) what are the implications for future school-home collaborations? This study contributes to building a greater understanding of Latina/o community participants' views on the role of parents within the school setting by exploring the counter narrative. Through the approach of educational praxis we aim to understand the culture of both, the Latina/o Leadership Academy (LLA), and schools, in an attempt to establish dialogue focused on parent involvement from Latina/os in order to positively impact student achievement.

During the course of our research, we discovered that a formally trained group of Latina/o parents calling themselves the Latina/o Leadership Academy recently emerged in the community. Fortunately, there is evidence in the form of the Latina/o Leadership Academy to suggest the tides are turning as new power structures emerge within the non-dominant sector of the community. Increased leadership capabilities within the Latina/o community combined with data propelling educators to improve, makes for an opportune scenario to affect change. As educators, we seek to capitalize on these shifts to view the intersectionality of perspectives on parent involvement between LLA parents and school administrators. Additionally, we hope to foster an alliance between these two distinctive groups that supports positive student outcomes for all students, but especially Latina/o children in the VSD. As a result of integrating cultural

diplomacy, we conclude that creating a more egalitarian communication mode of operation in the school system will foster strong bonds, trust, and improvements for all students in the VSD.

Educational praxis, the interdependent process in which reflection informs action, was utilized as we joined forces with Latina/o participants and school administrators to challenge existing power inequities grounded within our community in order to promote greater equity and a shared understanding around parent involvement. A pool of community knowledge along with expert researchers, provides insights from those most impacted by the issue at hand.

Through a critical participatory action research (CPAR) model (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014), we were able to see the strengths and collective voice of parents from non-dominant backgrounds. CPAR also helped us to examine institutional beliefs with school principals within three elementary schools. Utilizing CPAR, we achieved our goals in promoting a collective understanding around parent involvement and helped lay the groundwork for a future increase in parent engagement from members of the Latina/o community.

Admittedly, there is a substantial body of evidence that has detailed both the power of parental involvement and obstructions to Latina/o parents participation in the school improvement process; however, our study sought to analyze perspectives on parent involvement from members of both the dominant and nondominant culture at the local level with the intent to bring about change (Francis et al., 2016; Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016; Ishimaru, 2014; Jeynes, 2003; Kwan & Wong, 2016; Torre & Murphy, 2016).

Positionality

Although our choice of CPAR and critical race theory (CRT) provide clues as to our beliefs, we would like to be transparent about the beliefs, assumptions, and bias that may shape this study. When examining our beliefs and perspectives, we find alignment rooted in our midwestern upbringing. Although we met as teachers in a state far from home, both of us were raised in the state of Michigan and coincidentally attended the same university. We were both raised in upper, middle class, white homes. Collectively, we have worked in the midwestern, southern, and western United States, as well as Mexico, almost exclusively at the elementary school level.

Using a strength-based lens, we choose to view the similarities between our geographical background, race, gender, educational background, profession, and socio-economic status positively. Perhaps it is some of these similarities that brought us together as educators in the same elementary school interested in pursuing related research topics.

However, as researchers we must acknowledge that commonalities in our backgrounds create potential blind spots if not actively managed. As White, privileged females who are considered upper middle class in terms of socio-economic status, our beliefs and opinions have been shaped over time by the master narrative, which is the social story told by those in power (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Attending school districts with few minority students, and a University where it was easy to associate with only like individuals, it was not until we started our teaching positions at VSD that we were forced to examine the concepts of race and equality. And even still, due to our race, socioeconomic status, and roll as educators in the system, we do so from a position of

power. Due to our race and upper-class status we inherently carry “the invisible backpack of White privilege” (McIntosh, 1988, p.3).

However, as women we have experienced situations of oppression that left us reeling. It is experiences from both ends of our intersectional identities that have given us insights and raised our curiosities around the two sides of the system of inequality; oppression and privilege. Upon becoming educators, experiences of the oppressed became more visible, which led us to contemplate how we may use our privilege, as White women and educators, to create a platform for others with less social status to be heard.

As critical pedagogues, we instinctively take an activist stance to right injustices in the world. We are not neutral observers, nor do we pretend to be. We acknowledge that our positions of power and natural perspective belonging to the dominant Anglo culture. As White female insiders within the system of education, we are acutely aware that organizational structures benefit those of the dominant culture while silencing nondominant students and families, in particular, Latina/o students and families at VSD.

However, it is our status as educational “insiders” that provides institutional knowledge and a platform from which to challenge the master narrative agenda. As long standing members of the VSD teaching community, we are privy to insights that allow us to identify and understand educators’ beliefs around parent involvement. Similarly, our insider status enables us to contribute to the decision making processes at the school and district level. Conversely, in terms of culture and racial identity, we are considered outsiders by members of the Latina/o community who are pursuing a similar outcome. Therefore, it is critical that we seek out collaborators, in the form of the Latina/o Leaders, who have lived the counter narrative. In fact, it is the counter narrative, which differs from our own, that we sought to elevate. Fortunately, Stephanie’s connection to an early education center where many of the Latina/o leaders work led to initial collaborations that developed into the concept for this study. As a board member and a parent of children who attend this school, she was able to reach out to some of her acquaintances who had completed the LLA program to begin to foster relationships grounded in mutual respect and trust, which allowed both researchers and participants to converse in a transparent manner.

Defining Parental Involvement: A Varied and Complex Term

A large body of evidence supports the idea that parental involvement positively predicts student academic success (Bellon, Ngware, & Adamassu, 2017; Francis et al., 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016; Hattie, 2009; Ishimaru, 2014; Jeynes, 2003; Jeynes, 2017; Kwan & Wong, 2016; Torre & Murphy, 2016). The literature reviewed demonstrates inconsistencies around how to operationally define parental involvement, which has led to conflicting data as to which types of parental involvement are most impactful on student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Jeynes (2003) directly refers to this confusion when he states, “Parental involvement, after all, can be a vague term that can mean countless different things to different people” (p. 204). As Jeynes points out, there exists a disparity between how educators and families have chosen to define parental involvement. This is significant because varied meaning and functions of parental involvement amongst stakeholders can lead to misunderstandings, conflict, and ineffective school improvement efforts (Lawson, 2003; Lawson

& Briar-Lawson, 1997; Lightfoot, 1978).

In addition, Malone (2015) contends divergence in meaning-making may result from the fact that diversity in schools has increased exponentially, while the collective body of U.S. educators has remained homogeneous. Anderson and Minke (2007) captured a holistic definition of parental involvement when they describe it as “parent beliefs about the role that they should play in their children’s education” (p. 315). Scholars seeking more specificity have classified myriad activities ranging from formal to informal and from school-based to home-based under the term parental involvement (De Gaetano, 2007; Epstein, 1995; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Zarate, 2007).

Commonalities have been discovered amongst educators’ long-standing definitions of parental involvement; however, it should be noted that “most models of parent involvement have been derived from and tested with White middle-class families” (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009, p.400). As highlighted by Barajas-Lopez and Ishimaru (2016), many educators still hold the belief that parental involvement is comprised of passive, school-centric activities, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, school performances, open houses, and parent-teacher association meetings. These traditional beliefs and a lack of cultural understanding can imply that a Latina/o parent does not have a role in the school environment. A one-size-fits-all mentality does not acknowledge diversity and “is fueled by unacknowledged structural racism” (De Gaetano, 2007, p.146). There are embedded unconscious biases in defining parental involvement and according to Francis et al. (2016) “Barriers exist to making these partnerships a reality in many schools, including cultural mistrust among families who experience marginalization and a prevalence of school professionals harboring low expectations for families with low incomes and/or families of color” (p. 281). In other words, Euro-American/Anglo educators value parental involvement that is visible, promotes the school’s agenda, and conforms to the dominant Anglo belief system (Valencia, 1997).

Cultural Differences in Parental Involvement

While the subject on defining the phrase parental involvement is broadly construed and is a highly manipulated term, the context depends on how it is used and who uses it. Ramirez (2010) posits that the term has undergone much debate and that the idea of effective parental involvement is culturally constructed. For instance, in one mixed methods study with seventy-seven Asian American participants it was discovered that 68.8%, the overwhelming majority of parents, defined parental involvement as “support at home” (Kim, An, Leah Kim, & Kim, 2016). Similarly, another study with seventy-eight families who were either Asian American or European American suggested that Asian American parents place great emphasis on regulating the child’s at-home learning environment and supporting homework, while European American parents cite the importance of more visual participation in the school setting (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009).

Zarate (2007), through her work with the Latina/o community in three large metropolitan areas, found that Latina/o parents primarily categorize parental involvement into two categories; (1) life participation and (2) academic involvement. The examples provided in the studies previously mentioned, according to Zarate, would be classified as life participation, which generally involves monitoring the child’s activities, teaching good morals, and participating in the day to day activities of the child. When defining academic involvement in this study, Latina/o parents mentioned activities centered around formal education that took place both in and out of the home environment. For example, academic involvement included listening to your child read,

attending parent-teacher conferences, and inquiring about homework. However, Mexican immigrant parents, who are newcomers to the American educational system, may not be sure of how their involvement with the school and the education of their children should be structured (Dotson-Blake, 2010).

One result of Zarate's (2007) study was the notion that Latina/o parents "equate involvement in their child's education with involvement in their lives: participation in their children's lives ensures that their formal schooling is complemented with educación taught in the home" (p. 8). In this cultural context, parents felt their primary duty was to holistically educate their children in the house, which in turn would benefit and compliment their students' formal education at school. In the same manner, research studies have also noted that ethnic minorities who have a primary language other than English tend to be more involved in students' home life rather than school life (Gonzalez et. al, 2013; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Thus, given that families and educators see parental involvement in a multitude of ways, it is not surprising that school leadership is perplexed by the lack of parental involvement and often parents are left feeling excluded, uninvited, and unwelcomed to participate (Ramirez, 2010).

As the purpose of this study is to explore how those from various perspectives define parental involvement, we have chosen to broadly define parental involvement as a parent's ability to impact their own and other children's educational experiences.

Latina/o Leadership

The Latina/o community is growing in size and influence nation-wide. In fact, the Latina/o population has grown six-fold since the 1970s (Tobar, 2018). As this population grows, new organizations that support and represent Latina/o interests have emerged. With just a quick search, one can find formal organizations that represent Latina/o interests across the spectrum of education. However, researchers are also documenting a considerable amount of informal, or self-led, Latina/o organizations comprised of parents striving to positively impact their students educational experience (Cline & Necochea, 2001; Jasis & Marriott, 2010; Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004).

Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) state, "Historically, parents in general, and low-income parents in particular, have had limited participation in roles that count in decision making and policy implementation in schools" (p. 6). However, much is being learned from exceptions to this rule, as an increasing number of Latina/o parents mobilize to challenge the educational system in an effort to improve their children's schooling. As noted, Latina/o leadership may arise within a school system or come from the community and Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) remind us of the implications, "emergent activism is altering the landscape of many school communities, renewing the hope of school reform" (p. 33).

Jasis & Marriott (2010) examine how participation in a formalized educational opportunity, Project Avanzado, influenced a group of Latina/o migrant worker parents' abilities and desires to interact with the educational process of their children. This study suggested that parent participation in an educational program led to an increase in assertive interactions between parents and educators that improved educational outcomes for their children. While the topic of the formalized community-based parent programs available to Latina/o parents in our community was focused on leadership rather than educational advancement, our study was also looking for how this type of experience might impact parents' perceptions. Jasis & Marriott investigated programmatic features that shifted attitudinal changes around education, whereas we explored how participating parents have come to conceptualize parent involvement.

Researchers supporting the sustainability of this movement have identified common variables and underlying motivations amongst exemplars of successful Latina/o leadership organizations focused on impact in the school setting. Overall, these studies suggest that dynamic Latina/o parent groups often have facilitated leadership development opportunities, function independently from school-based influences, and address concerns that emerge from group participants organically (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Fernandez & Paredes Scribner, 2018; Fuentes, 2013), all of which occurred with the formation of the LLA.

Critical Race Theory: Educational Activism and Advocacy

As researchers and educators, we contend that race is a powerful force that shapes the undercurrents of the educational system. Therefore, we draw upon critical race theory (CRT) to structure this study. Darder, Torres, and Baltodano (2017) believe that we cannot mine the intellect that exists without first acknowledging and then attempting to shift the unjust society in which it was created. Critical theorists propose that the education platform can and should be used to uncover truth, free of political, racial, cultural, and socio-economic constraints (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado-Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001). This can only be done if educators are aware of these constraints and are willing to constantly question how these outside forces shape the pedagogy and knowledge that is presented to students (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Deficit thinking is based on colonial logic that assigns all responsibility for academic underachievement to students' deficits or shortcomings. Furthermore, a deficit approach adheres to the belief that families are also responsible for failures because they do not value education (Delgado-Bernal & Aleman, 2017). Hegemonic discourse, if undisturbed, filters out and reshapes stories from the non-dominant culture to conform to mainstream ideology.

The counter-story is also a powerful tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Yosso et al, 2001). Counter-stories can “shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p.32). Drawing from CRT methodology, this study documented the master narrative as told from the perspective of educational insiders (e.g. principals), but more importantly, it illustrated and elevated the counter narrative comprised of stories told by those who are traditionally excluded. Therefore, this study sought out and elevated the counter narrative from those who experience it. Although our personal backgrounds align more with the dominant culture, as educators and researchers our beliefs in social justice demand that we explored the experiences that represent all students.

In summary, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), the basic tenets of CRT are as follows:

- Racism is an everyday occurrence for people of color in the United States.
- Race is a social construct.
- The dominant society radicalizes different minority groups to create economic advantages for those in the dominant majority.

Critical race theorists, like Darder et al. (2017), claim education is innately embedded in the fabric of society. Therefore, members of the educational community cannot remain neutral in the struggle for power and representation of those who have historically been underrepresented. This makes CRT important to our study because it highlights demographics, exposes the social and

economic disparities in our community, and emphasizes utilizing the cultural and social wealth of Latina/os.

Research Design and Methodology

The study utilized a community-based critical participatory action research (CPAR) approach to qualitative inquiry (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). The nature of the study was a key driver in the selection of our methodology. CPAR provided a logical structure for teacher-researchers, such as ourselves, seeking to explore a localized issue rooted in asymmetrical power structures. The study analyzed the perspectives and lived experiences of participants: Latina/o community leaders and elementary school administrators. Over the course of eight months, 11 interviews were conducted, which allowed us to interview a total of sixteen participants. Additionally, at the end of this project all participants were invited to attend a round table discussion. Two administrators and seven LLA members were in attendance, which is a testament to their belief in this study's collaborative process. In order to create a safe environment, all participants in the interviews were given the choice to respond in Spanish or English, according to their comfort level. Video recording by the teacher-researchers were used to record, translate, and transcribe spoken data verbatim. When considering how to structure the round table discussion between school administrators and Latina/o parents, we utilized a strategy consistent with the principles of CRT; restorative justice. The restorative justice methods of sitting in a circle and using a talking piece to ensure all voices are heard allowed us to maintain an egalitarian atmosphere despite perceived discrepancies in power.

Context

County. This study took place in a historically liberal county in a very conservative state, where demographics, economy, and political views differ greatly from the rest of the state. The county in question is known as rural community with a rich history of ranching, national parks, and outdoor adventure. While the beauty of the valley remains a constant, the county of present day has transformed into a retreat for the super wealthy. In fact, it topped the list of counties with the highest per capita income in the United States in 2014 due partly to an influx of second homeowners. With increasing wealth comes soaring property values, new construction, and a rise in new businesses demanding employees.

Many people answering the demands for year-round workforce are of Latina/o descent. An increase in growth of the Latina/o community appears to be a state-wide trend. Although it was reported by the U.S. Census that Latina/os comprised 15 percent of the county's population, local service providers indicated the estimate is actually closer to 25-30 percent. Therefore, our county has almost 20% more Latina/o residents than the rest of the state, which is substantial. In summary, the county is an affluent community with a large number of Latina/o residents. With a Latina/o population almost 20% larger than the state average, this county's Latina/o community has reached a critical mass, which has led to an increase in self- advocacy.

School District. The Valley School District is a small rural school district in the western United States. Comprised of nine schools, this public organization educates around 2800 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Reflecting the dichotomy of the surrounding area the

organization serves students of poverty, as well as those of great wealth. With a graduation rate of over 97% and a National Blue Ribbon Award for academic achievement, the high school is a state exemplar of success. However, with a more diverse student population at the elementary, middle school, and approaching the high school level, the student achievement gap, that averages around 40% across the district, continues to favor White, monolingual students. It is at the beginning of this divergence in achievement, elementary school, where we focused our work.

Mountain Elementary. Mountain Elementary, a Spanish/English dual immersion school, centers instruction and student growth around the three pillars of dual language: bilingualism and biliteracy, high academic achievement, and sociocultural competence. Mountain Elementary has a student population of 478 students, which makes it the largest elementary school in VSD. Following the national model for 50/50 dual immersion programs, approximately 50% of the student population are Latina/o and consider Spanish their native language. In contrast, the other 50% of students are native English speakers who identify as White. The ethnically and linguistically diverse nature of this school may offer a unique perspective on beliefs and practices used to engage Latina/o families in the educational process.

Central Elementary. With approximately 320 students, Central Elementary School is the second largest elementary school in the Valley School District. Of the 320 students, 83% of the students identify as White. Whereas, approximately 17% self-identified as Latina/o. With a more homogenous demographic Central Elementary allows for another, perhaps more traditional, perspective on our topic of interest.

Town Elementary. Comprised of 275 students, Town Elementary School is the smallest of the centrally located elementary schools; however, it was incorporated in the study due to its large population of Latina/o students. Latina/o students that attend this school comprise 38% of the student body.

Participants

In accordance with CPAR methodology, participants in this study were derived from four different subgroups who share the same goal of achieving successful outcomes for all students; school administrators, LLA facilitators, LLA members, and teacher-researchers (see Figure 1).

Latina/o Leadership Academy Members. Latina/o community members are assembling with the help of community organizations, like the Latino Services Network, to demand their voices are heard regarding community safety, affordable housing, and education. One such group emboldening Latina/os to play a more active role in community civics is the Latina/o Leadership Academy. According to the LLA facilitators, the LLA originated with support from the Latino Service Network in response to requests by several Latina/o parents who were looking to become more involved in the community. Similarly, there were many community organizations seeking

increased collaboration with the Latina/o community. Therefore, a Community Foundation grant along with in-kind donations from a plethora of local organizations that support youth, education, and the Latina/o community contributed funding and resources. With VSD's Latina/o students consisting of approximately 40% of the student body, the formation of the LLA is a significant development with the potential to lead to more positive outcomes for Latina/o students.

Encouraged by community leaders and supported by a consultant from *Abriendo Puertas*, two cohorts of Latina/o community members completed an intense program to develop skills in leadership, professional communication, civic engagement and technology usage. Interviewing non-dominant families, in the form of Latino Community Leaders, enabled us to describe and understand the lived experiences of their interactions with the local educational institutions and helped us to construct the counter narrative.

Representing the point of view of non-dominant parents, a group of 11 Latina/o parents and two Latina women, who led and supported training of the parent group, were selected to participate in the study. This cross-section of the Latina/o demographic was selected based on their membership in the Latina/o Leadership Academy. More specifically, out of the 26 LLA graduates 11 participated in this study and were invited to take part due to either their participation on the LLA education sub-committee or based on a recommendation from LLA education sub-committee members. Eight of the 11 study participants work in community organizations that support or are related to education, such as Head Start, county library, etc. Group members were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews and a round table discussion with the participating elementary school principals.

Elementary School Administrators. Elementary principals were selected to represent the school district perspective on the role of parental involvement within their respective schools. The entire elementary principal team is made up of seven individuals, of which is 71% female and 28% male. Furthermore, everyone in the group is White except for one Latina administrator. Unfortunately, although the Latina assistant principal supports one of our focus schools she declined participating in the interview process due to other commitments. Participating school administrators included two White males and one White female. These individuals were selected to participate based on the demographic composition of their schools. Therefore, the leaders of the three elementary schools that serve Latina/o students were incorporated into the study. Interviews with school administrators allowed us to determine to what extent the master narrative influences their perception of parental involvement.

Data Analysis

Data sources were continuously analyzed in order for us to fully engage in participatory research as an ongoing process. Throughout the analysis process we were cognizant of our research question in order to answer: How do elementary school administrators and a group of Latina/o leaders in the rural school setting define parent involvement? And, what are the implications for future school-home collaborations?

As teacher-researchers working in a collaborative partnership, our ability to analyze data as a

team is considered beneficial. After independently coding the evidence gathered, we came together to compare results. Any disparity in the findings were examined together. Due to the fact that our first examination of data was conducted independently of each other we were able to “cast a wider analytic net and provide a ‘reality check’ for each other” (Saldaña, 2013, p.27). All of the interviews and focus group transcripts were transcribed from a recording then entered into MAX qda. After entering transcribed data, first-order codes, were determined using what Saldaña (2013) refers to as initial coding. This is an open ended approach that allows for the data to drive the interpretation. We engaged in line by line and in vivo coding and our theoretical lenses of critical race theory in accordance with a deductive approach. Additionally, analytic memos were created during the initial coding process by each researcher in order to capture reflections, insights and questions. The process of utilizing these memos when comparing and discussing individual coding created a sense of transparency and lead to a more dynamic conversation around emerging themes. During this stage we noticed many codes associated with current practices of parent involvement, barriers to involvement, definitions and understandings. Subsequently, data were further refined using an inductive approach of second-order coding referred to as pattern coding by Saldaña (2013), which allowed us to group initial codes into a smaller number of themes. Abbott (2004) described this process using the analogy of rearranging or reorganizing data just as one would decorate a room, “you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on” (p. 215). Second-order coding allowed us to step away from theories or assumptions outlined in our literature review in order to create sub-categories that more explicitly reflected the data collected. We applied the theoretical lens of critical race theory to our second order coding by identifying specific aspects of CRT, such as counterstorytelling and experiential knowledge. The cyclical act of coding, memo analysis and re-coding using first and second-order codes allowed us to condense and categorize data while generating new concepts and themes (Saldaña, 2013).

New knowledge was generated by examining themes, which were then compared with existing literature on the topic with the intent to understand how participants construct and operationalize the definition of parent involvement. Community participation through the use of member-checking, by Latina/o Leaders, in the research process provided checks and balances to ensure trustworthiness of the findings.

Upon completion of this analysis, participants and ourselves met during a face-to-face “round table” discussion to examine implications and provide recommendations on how to create a more inclusive environment for all school leadership and members of the Latina/o community not engaged in the study. In order to create a safe atmosphere where all voices could be heard, the round table was structured using a restorative justice circle. Round one of the discussions involved solely LLA participants. The goal of this sixty minute discussion was to do some member checking and allow this group to share their thoughts on parent involvement with each other. School administrators joined for round two, which focused on allowing the Latina/o participants to share their thoughts on parent involvement and offer suggestions around how VSD can support home and school-based parental participation.

Findings

The themes presented, as follows, were generated from the perspectives of three elementary principals and 11 Latina/o parents who completed the LLA training program thus formally

establishing themselves as Latina/o community leaders. Guided by our research question, three themes surfaced during the data analysis: (1) Latina/o leaders defined parent involvement as support in the home, (2) School leaders definitions of parent involvement are broadening, and (3) The biggest barrier to participation in this community is the expense of living in a resort town, not necessarily culture. To better illustrate the lived experiences of participants, quotes are provided for each theme.

Theme 1: Latina/o leaders value school-based interactions with educators, but primarily define parent involvement as supporting their children academically in the home environment.

The parent as the child's first teacher

Latina/o participants held the perspective that education is supported at home when discussing what it means to be a parent who is involved in his/her child's education. A recurrent sub-theme in the interviews was the notion that a child's education begins at home with the parent being the child's first teacher. This sentiment, which was echoed by several of the participants, may originate from the philosophy of the Head Start program that many of our participants have familiarity with as either current or former Head Start parents or an early Head Start teacher. As one interviewee, Javier, stated, "I think the basis for teaching, it comes from parents, you know, from a very young age, having good habits like readings, things like that." Another participant, Sancia, commented, "As parents, we must be the first educators. And, obviously, try to encompass as much as we can with basic educational principles, moral education, um...and when the kids go to school, support educators."

Parent involvement: home-based connections

When prompted to discuss the characteristics of parent involvement done effectively, responses mainly focused on home-based interactions, such as, spending quality time with their children and staying connected to their children's lives, both at home and school. Miguel, a parent of three, commented:

For me, parent involvement, it's like get close to your kid in ideas, in mind, and physically. You have to share quality time instead, just time. Or you have to pay attention to what they are doing at school and after school and before school and all that even when you are not there.

Adriana, this participant's wife agreed, adding, "You have, you as parents, you have to know exactly where, where are they doing and where are they. For me, that's parent involvement. So they care about your kids' life, instead of your own life." Sancia supported the notion that quality time spent with your child is imperative, and added that active involvement means inquiring about all aspects of the child's daily school life by asking questions. "It's hard, at times, but I feel that quality time is what kids need most. Not quantity but quality. And that requires being involved with your kid. Meaning, asking them how their day was...um, who are your friends?"

Parents need support from educators

Another sub theme that came to light was the idea that parents need information from educators to move beyond personal connections with their children to providing home-based support around academics. Monica captured this sentiment when she said:

I think we are the first teachers and I think teachers just do their job, supporting us as much as they can but the job is our job. Um, sometimes some parents think that teachers are the ones who have to do all the teaching but I think that we, as parents, have the obligation to teach them that we are the first parents because...without teachers, us

parents could not help our kids develop, academically.

The idea that parents need information from educators around academics was heard throughout the interviews.

In our experience, parents often use a child's homework as an opportunity to provide support and figure out the academic content being presented at school. However, many interviewees noted that either lack of homework assigned or homework asking students to use conceptual models unfamiliar to the parents left them feeling inadequate to support academics in the house without more information. Rafael, an active parent often seen at his daughter's dual immersion elementary, summed up this common frustration in saying:

But often we think that what we learned in school is enough to help them. But we know too well that times have changed. There are new things now...new ways of teaching which are different than back in our days, no? So, if you don't go to school, you won't know how are they teaching your kid or what! It has happened to me when I had to help my daughter with math...or my son. I do it one way and she's being taught differently... and I don't know how to help her if I don't go to school and ask and get some information.

Fortunately, Rafael feels comfortable interacting with the bilingual teachers at his child's school, however two of our participants who work as interpreters at the school say Latina/o parents coming in to ask questions about academics is rare. Sancia, an interpreter at Town Elementary School explained:

But when parents get a letter (about academics) and they don't ask...that's the problem. They don't ask. You explain it to them but some parents say their kids are not understanding properly...and that's when we say "come on over and we can explain it". That's why getting closer to schools, although you may not have the time, but maybe an email...a call. Hey can you tell the teacher this and that...cause I don't get it...and teachers are always willing to do this. I think that often we will not understand the terminology but that's where parents should ask for explanations.

In general, LLA participants were perplexed as to why more Latino/a parents do not actively seek support when confusion around academic arises. The plethora of resources for Latina/os, both in the traditional and bilingual elementary schools, was frequently mentioned as beyond adequate. Monica expressed frustration around common "excuses" she has heard from other Latina/o parents:

Well, I think that asking is quite important. I've met people who are like "What's that?"...but they don't really ask. They remain clueless when they ask if they understood and they say "yes"...but they didn't understand! I know many parents don't use the computer but we have phones so we can call and ask. As parents, we shouldn't make excuses like "I didn't understand and that's it!". Teachers help us in many ways! Counselors, translators...we have lots of tools in our schools to help us understand what we didn't understand.

Although most did not find it acceptable for parents to remain in a state of confusion around their children's academics, LLA members speculated as to some of the reasons for the lack of parent initiative in addressing confusion or concerns. Monica said, "Lots of people think they will be judged for asking and the other, maybe they're afraid to show up because they don't know English." Paloma felt her husband did not communicate his concerns with his son's teachers because at, "First because he was ashamed...and later on out of sheer pride."

Generally speaking, Latina/o community leaders who participated in this study define parent involvement as centering around support within the home environment, however they did acknowledge the importance of seeking support from educators to gather the knowledge and skills necessary to assist their children with academics at home. Furthermore, participating parents felt the level of resources available to them through the school district left very few justifiable reasons for a Latina/o parents to remain confused when they need clarification.

Theme 2: School administrators' beliefs about successful parent involvement are shifting beyond the traditional definition of parent involvement to include home-based support, however they continue to strive for more Latina/o parent participation in the school setting.

Although all three White elementary school principals aspire to see more Latina/o parents at school-based events, the vast majority of comments about parent involvement revolved around the idea of exploring new, non-traditional, avenues for parental participation. Steve, the bilingual principal of Mountain Elementary School a dual immersion school, said:

Effective parent involvement. I think it, it's hard to define. It could take a lot of different forms. Traditionally, it's parents who are present in the building for events, specifically conversations with teachers about academics, parent/teacher conferences. Those types of things. It also includes engagement in what's happening in the classroom and home. I think a lot of our parents are engaged, although they're not present here.

Steve went on to describe a Latino father who he has never seen in the school facility, yet exemplifies a high level of parent involvement.

I had a conversation with a parent at the board meeting last week when we were recognizing the kids who sold apples and it was a Latino father who didn't speak English and he said to me that he was really happy to, his, his son could help, they could help the school by selling apples. He said we don't have a lot of money. We can't give the school money. What we can do is sell apples. And that is, you know, a parent who, I don't know if that parent ever shows up here at school or not but that's extremely high parent engagement. Just a different form of it.

Clarifying the school district's definition of parent involvement

In order to envision more successful future collaborations with parents in the Latina/o community, all participating administrators felt the need to get more clear on the school district's operationalized definition of parent involvement, as they felt there was most likely variation amongst schools. The need for clarity was summed up by Bob, the principal of Central Elementary:

I would start by saying as an administrative team, our ELL task force in particular, realized that we've not done a good job with a shared understanding of what that is. We feel like we're missing the mark as a district around parent engagement with our Latino families more than anything else.

Bob went on to remark that even when parents show up to school-based events, educators are not clear on the exact role they are hoping parents play. "we don't get our Latino parents showing up at certain events, but if we did, we're not even clear on what we expect parents to do."

More information needed from Latina/o parents

Venturing beyond the traditional school-based concept of parent involvement means learning more about how Latina/o parents view this concept. A common view amongst school leadership was the need to spend more time listening to the Latina/o community to gather information on their thoughts and ideas around parent involvement. Trish expressed a need to find out more

when she said:

What they would like to see. What they hope for. What are some possibilities. We talked about having even just a Spanish parent night to try to get straight to those, straight to those questions. I have to hear their voice to know what they want to see because if we're making all these great plans around how we engage parents and that's not what is interesting to them or feasible for them, then you have a mismatch. I think understanding their reality has been a challenge as well. How they feel about school. How they, how they think about school, period. How they situate their involvement with school, with their culture.

While Trish proposed a parent night to discuss these concepts with Latina/o parents, Bob suggested a task force comprised of Latina/o parents as a method of gathering more information.

I mean, I guess that would kind of turn that question to parents. Guys, what role do you want to play? Here's what we need you to do for your child's education. But how do you want to be involved and why aren't you involved? Even the logistics, how can we communicate to parents, like you know, is it an app? Is it a text or what? And we see a task force as helping us answer some of those questions. (Bob)

As school administrators work to gather information that may inform their personal and collective definition of parent involvement, they are also contemplating how to set a collaborative tone within the school setting that promotes discourse with Latina/o parents.

We want them to feel comfortable, welcome to come into the school, whether it's a meeting to, 'cause they have a concern or even a challenge, whether it's a principal, a counselor or a teacher, we know that our affluent Anglo families don't hesitate. They'll come in and challenge us and it's not always a good challenge. I'm not saying that but we want our Latino families, if they have a need, a concern, to walk in this door and ask about it. (Bob)

When summarizing the second theme it was apparent that elementary school administrators representing schools that serve Latina/o students in the Valley School District are open to and actively seeking input to redefine their view and expectations around parental involvement, however ideally they would also like to see Latina/o parents engage within the school setting on some level.

Theme 3: While a variety of perspectives were presented about the role culture plays in the perceived lack of Latina/o parent involvement, the majority of Latina/o participants agreed that a factor barring involvement was the barriers of living in this community.

As previously discussed, there are differing beliefs of what parent involvement is, whether at home or at school. However, when we look at participation or involvement in the school setting, cultural beliefs may not be the strongest barrier for parents. Although some felt that being raised in a different country or culture from where your child now goes to school can create limitations:

I was thinking, the first one, many of Latinos, our culture is like we don't get involved because we think like education, it's just for the school Like academic education is just for the school and we think we can't do anything about it. (Carmela)

Miguel echoed that sentiment by saying, "I mean, you, you are not facing a school district problem. You are facing a culturalist problem which is like that.

Some of the Latino leaders felt that parents might be using culture as an excuse not to get involved but did not feel that reasoning was valid. Although their comments could be viewed as involvement with their children in general, it definitely can apply to the school setting as well.

Monica indicates that parents' views need to expand past how they were educated and encompass their new reality.

We are millionaires when it comes to education. (Our town) is a place where we shouldn't come up with excuses to get involved with our kids. I know that, like I said before, rent is hard but, like Martha said...if you want to get involved, you just do it. And if you want your kid to succeed, you must get involved and show him. You can't just show them what you learned in your culture. You must show them new things so they are better yet. So, our culture is a hurdle but on the other hand...I think it's us. These barriers are self-imposed.. (Monica)

Carmela seems to bridge the thinking between culture as a barrier and other barriers:

I think it's because of the culture that we have, that we do not get involved, and the other reason is because many parents, many parents work too much and then it's like why bother? Who can do it? I need to work.

Barriers to school-based parent involvement

One of the greatest barriers to involvement from the Latina/o perspective seems to be the high costs associated with living in a rural mountain resort town. Due to the great expense many parents must work multiple jobs, creating scenarios where their time with their families becomes extremely limited. Miguel indicates that struggles of living in this community create a chain reaction:

So not everyone has the same situation at home, so not everyone has the same situation economically or I mean, some of them has to work so hard and this is a chain. So one issue, one issue bring you to another issue and another issue and on the end, you have to spend too much time working and less time with your family.

Monica suggests that it is not that parents do not want to be involved, but they are struggling to make sure their families are provided for. She also echoes the chain reaction sentiments put forth by Miguel.

Living in this town is kind of very, very expensive, hard and if you, if you don't work, you cannot pay for the rent or you cannot pay for the bills sometimes. It's kind of very, very hard for parents to show up to those conferences. So sometimes they have no choices. They, it's, it's not they don't want to be involved on their kids. They don't have time because if they don't work, they don't... they don't pay for bills, rent or... So it depends on, I mean, living in this, especially in (our town) is very hard. It's very expensive. Sometimes there is single mothers that they have three, four children and it's very, very hard for them because it's the only support at home who brings money for, pay for rent, pay for bills, for feed their kids or dressing their kids. (Monica)

Javier also agrees that the expense of working in a resort town is prohibitive for parents.

We live in a community or a county where life or life is very expensive, you know. People need to have two, three jobs to be able to pay their rent, to be able to afford food, to be able to afford things. So if you don't have two jobs, you know, and you're getting paid minimum, you know, you're not gonna make it here. So yeah, I mean, I guess that's the biggest challenge, trying to get parents, you know, to get involved because they're so busy, you know, trying to make a living here, you know, with two jobs or three jobs sometimes, you know, so... That was the biggest challenge.

Other barriers that were discussed by both the Latina/o leaders and the administration were language and the lack of understanding how the school system works, since it is different from

the system they went through as children. Bob, an administrator, specifically said that language and unfamiliarity with the systems were barriers to involvement at the school. However, he did also indicate that barriers could be “sometimes, it comes back to either poverty or just financial stress and the amount of work time, we talk about here, it could be that.” One of the Latino leaders explained more what challenges language may present:

When we arrive to United States of America, one of the first challenge we face is the new language, which stops us to socialized. When somebody ask us to attend an event where we have to share with English-speakers, we refuse because we do not want to be integrated. Nevertheless, there are a few episode in my life that the new language, the English, isolates me from an effective communication because I feel I do not speak very well the language and I cannot move forward. (Rafael)

Language barriers can create a fear that keeps parents from asking questions or seeking the help they may need. Monica stated, “Maybe they’re afraid to show up because they don’t know English. They don’t know how they can help their kids.” Not knowing how to help their children was an idea that was also presented by Maria when she was asked if culture was a barrier to involvement. She explained,

I disagree that it is cultural. I believe we need more workshops for parents. In the short time I’ve been involved in the community I’ve met many people who are truly interested in wanting to help...but they sometimes do not understand the mechanisms.

Finally, some parents may not feel heard, which may be tied to the language barrier.

I don’t think it’s a cultural problem with the generation that lives here now. What I have seen (I don’t know to what degree) ahem...is that when Latino parents want to speak up for their kids...I’ve heard that some don’t want the tablets at home or on the weekends... and I’ve heard that the school does not listen to them. So it’s hard for them to speak up for their kids. If they have kids with special needs, it’s hard to determine with great clarity what is the diagnosis when it comes to their kids...and what are they being taught. (Rafael)

Paloma, who works as a school translator, reported similar issues:

I’ve seen parents being frustrated with the school. I’ve seen parents that the kids need special ed. There’s no communication back. There’s no, they have no idea how the kid is doing. Why is it, why the school took that position. I’ve seen some parents that want to hold their kids back for one year for their own reasons but it’s like... What I interpret is like their decisions or their opinions are not taken into account. I’ve seen kids that they’ve been placed in classes that they shouldn’t be. I mean, some kids don’t speak English and they just put them in Advanced Spanish, and just because you look the way you do.

In conclusion, although some barriers may be culturally based, language and stressors of living in a resort town seem to be the biggest hindrances to parents actually being physically present in the school setting. From the CRT perspective, language and cultural values are seen as social wealth within the Latina/o community, however from the perspective of VSD leaders these same aspects create challenges to collaboration. VSD leaders seek to further educate themselves around potential cultural barriers with hopes of overcoming challenges and creating a collaborative environment that honors all members of the school community.

Discussion

As teacher-researchers, ultimately the purpose of this study was to positively impact the

educational community in which we work and live. In order to accomplish this goal, we sought to answer the questions, how do elementary school administrators and a group of Latina/o leaders in the rural school setting define parent involvement? And, what are the implications for future school-home collaborations? This study produced findings that corroborate the findings of a great deal of previous work in the field and contradicted others. Therefore, adding new knowledge to the field within the context of a rural setting. In addition, and more importantly, our study laid the foundation for two groups critical to our students' success, school administrators and community Latina/o leaders, to form an alliance for future collaborations.

Findings associated with theme one upheld previous research that suggested Latina/o parents conceptualize parental involvement as primarily activities occurring within the home environment. In accordance with Zarate's (2007) study, Latina/o parents in our study described parental involvement by naming activities that Zarate would classify as either life participation or academic involvement within the home. The idea that parents need information from educators around academics was heard throughout the interviews. This sentiment coincided with Good, Masewicz, and Vogel's (2010) findings from a study conducted in a rural area within our region, which determined that although Latina/o parents wanted to support children with their homework they ran into two barriers: limited English skills and lack of academic content knowledge. Whereas, participants in our study did not explicitly name lack of English language proficiency as a barrier, they did name their lack of content knowledge as an obstacle to support their students around academic content.

Historically, literature documenting school administrators from the dominant culture's beliefs on parent involvement asserts that Euro-American educators value parental involvement that is visible, promotes the school's agenda, and conforms to their belief system (Valencia, 1997). While there was some evidence of this belief system in our data set, surprisingly, our inquiry into the school administrators' definition of parental involvement evolved into theme two; school administrators' beliefs about successful parent involvement are shifting beyond the traditional definition of parent involvement to include home-based support, however they continue to strive for more Latina/o parent participation in the school setting.

Based on the White ethnicity of our school administrator participants, previous research would predict them to have a Eurocentric perspective on parent involvement comprised of passive, school-centric activities, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, school performances, open houses, and parent-teacher association meetings (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016), which was not the case. Conversely, our data indicated that although they would like to see some participation within the school setting, educators value parent support in the home environment and honor it as a substantial contribution. Furthermore, instead of seeking conformity from parents of the non dominant culture as previous research would anticipate, the principals in this study are seeking more information around Latina/o parents' aspirations for students and beliefs around parental involvement in hopes of implementing more culturally appropriate parent outreach practices.

In fact, the principals' beliefs in our study heed the call from critical race theorists that asks educators to acknowledge the validity of alternate definitions of parental involvement and supports the idea that school administrators in this district are seeking the nondominant perspective from Latina/o families, both in terms of conceptualizing parental involvement and in

the form of advocating for their students (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Orozco, 2008).

We have hypothesized one possible explanation for the findings seen in theme two. It could also be suggested that participating principals' breadth of experience in working with students and families in the Latina/o community has caused their beliefs and definition of parental involvement to evolve beyond the traditional view that claims parents not seen in the school setting are not actively engaged in their child's education. Bob, the most experienced of the school administrators in this study, has over fifteen years collaborating with Latina/o families both at the middle school and elementary level. Steve spent many years as a teacher and the last five as a principal, for a total of twenty-one years serving Latina/o students. While Trish is in her third year leading a school with a large Latina/o population. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesized that experience and a plethora of interactions with Latina/o parents has contributed to these White administrators' progressive viewpoint on parental involvement. The causation behind why our data from White school leaders contradicts perspectives traditionally presented in research will need to be explored in a future study.

Upon reflection on the third theme, it was not as clear cut as we may have initially believed. Our participants felt that although culture can be one of the barriers to parental involvement in the school setting, it is not the primary factor. Other factors include expense of living in a resort town, language, not feeling heard by the school, looking beyond how the parents were raised, and not knowing how to help or be active in the school. This final point was supported in the literature by Dotson-Blake (2010) who talked about how Mexican immigrant parents are unsure how they may be vital, active members in a school setting. Much of the literature talked about cultures that believe that parental involvement takes place at home. The members of the LLA echoed this sentiment in their statements, as can be seen in the discussion of theme one.

In their research, Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004) asked culturally and linguistically diverse families to define the ideal collaborative school-to-home relationship. Parents named six tenets of successful collaboration, “ (a) communication that is positive and sustainable, (b) commitment to the child and family, (c) equal power in decision-making and implementation, (d) competence in implementing and achieving goals, (e) mutual trust, and (f) mutual respect” (p. 375). Moving forward, it may be prudent to keep these tenets in mind to support families in being full participants in the school setting, both in the eyes of the parents and the administrators.

Implications and Future Considerations

This study demonstrates the various perspectives on parent involvement held by elementary school administrators and Latina/o parents in the Valley School District (VSD). As demonstrated above, generally our Latina/o parents define parent involvement as home-based parent to child interactions, while participating elementary school principals honor this type of participation, they are also continuing to strive to see more Latina/o parents participate in the school setting. Furthermore, although the current study was unable to say definitively whether culture influenced Latina/o parental involvement in this setting, there was agreement by all that the high cost of living in our county results in long workdays which contributed to less school-based parental involvement by parents in the Latina/o community. While these findings further enhanced our understanding of the challenges, it was the blossoming partnership between these

two groups created by this study that made us hopeful for positive future results for our students. In summary, we learned:

- (1) VSD Latina/o parents want to be involved in their children's education but may not know how.
- (2) Barriers due to the high cost of living (e.g. working multiple jobs to ensure there is food on the table and a roof over their heads) impede parents from being physically present in the school setting.
- (3) Not understanding the school system and how it differs from parents' school experience can be intimidating.
- (4) Second language insecurities limit interaction between Latina/o parents and English-speaking school administrators.
- (5) Participating VSD school administrators have outgrown the definition of parental involvement traditionally held by those in the dominant culture.
- (6) VSD school administrators and participating Latina/o parents aspire to connect with each other to improve student outcomes.

Therefore, we conclude that while there are identifiable barriers to active school-based parental involvement for Latina/o VSD parents, there are also shared aspirations and flexible viewpoints between Latina/o parents and school administrators that allow potential for future collaborations between these two stakeholder groups.

In our observations we noticed that seven of the LLA graduates and two of the participating school administrators got a chance to meet face to face to discuss current successes and challenges between the Latina/o community and the VSD. Principals eagerly asked questions of the Latina/o leaders and both groups worked to brainstorm future collaborative efforts. Equipped with new insights from a different viewpoint, both groups left with new ideas on how to inspire their respective peers to create a more collaborative and inclusive environment for next school year. Upon completion of this meeting, we saw one of the participating principals stop two of the Latina/o leaders while exiting the meeting to get their phone numbers. If this interaction is any indication of the future, we are hopeful this project is just the start of a future alliance focused on empowering Latina/o families in VSD. Family-school-community partnerships are critically important for the academic success of all students. However, it became very evident that Latina/os in this specific rural mountain resort community faced specific barriers and struggled to engage in partnership efforts. With the LLA as a conduit for mediation, we are hopeful of promoting the engagement of Latina/o families in partnerships.

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