

Fostering Latina/o Parental Involvement in a Rural Setting

by Rebecca Broderick and Stephanie Hardeman

Most people will likely agree that when parents are involved in their children's education the children perform better in school and experience more academic success. But what defines quality parental involvement? For example, is it being present in the school setting? Does parental involvement extend to the home environment? Jeynes (2003) addresses this complexity when he states, "*Parental involvement*, after all, can be a vague term that can mean countless different things to different people" (p. 204).

In current research, there are many definitions of parental involvement. For instance, child psychologists Wendy Gronlick and Maria Slowiaczek (1994) put forth a broad definition that contends parental involvement is "the dedication of resources by the parent to the child in a specific" domain (p. 238). The U.S. Department of Education, on the other hand, defines parental involvement as "the participation of parents in regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities" (2004, p. 3). The problem with many current definitions of parental involvement is that they have been built on research pertaining to White middle-class families (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). A central issue that needs to be addressed is what parental involvement might entail and how it might be conceptualized when schools serve large numbers of families from non-dominant backgrounds. Our article addresses this concern.

As educators in a rural district comprised of approximately 40% second language learners, mostly Latina/o, we were curious about the apparent lack of Latina/o parental involvement we saw at the schools in our district. We wanted to, not only understand this situation, but to act on our findings. As long standing members of the Valley School District

(VSD) teaching community, in roles as teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators, we are privy to insights that allow us to identify and understand educators' beliefs around parent involvement. Fortunately, in our quest for understanding, we discovered that a formally trained group of Latina/o parents calling themselves the Latina/o Leadership Academy (LLA)¹ had recently emerged in the community. Many members of the LLA worked or were connected to an early education center where Stephanie, a teacher researcher in this study, was an active participant as a board member and parent. That connection allowed us to reach out personally to the LLA members about our research. The discovery of the LLA and Stephanie's connections made it an opportune time to try to satiate our curiosity and see how we, in conjunction with other stakeholders, might assure that Latina/o parental involvement occurs in our district.

What started out as a mission to foster Latina/o parental involvement in decision-making processes at schools in our district, turned into a series of deep discussions about different facets of parental involvement. We structure the remainder of this paper in the following manner. First, we present a brief overview of three key ideas that surfaced as a result of our deep discussions about Latina/o parental involvement. Second, we present possible solutions to the issues identified in discussions with different stakeholders in our school district.

Key Ideas

We conducted a total of 11 interviews with the 11 LLA members, the two organizers/facilitators of the LLA, and three elementary school principals. Figure 1 shows the 11 LLA members (top), the three elementary principals (bottom right), and the two LLA facilitators (bottom left).

¹ To protect the rights and privacy of the participants in our study, all names of locations, organizations, and people are pseudonyms.

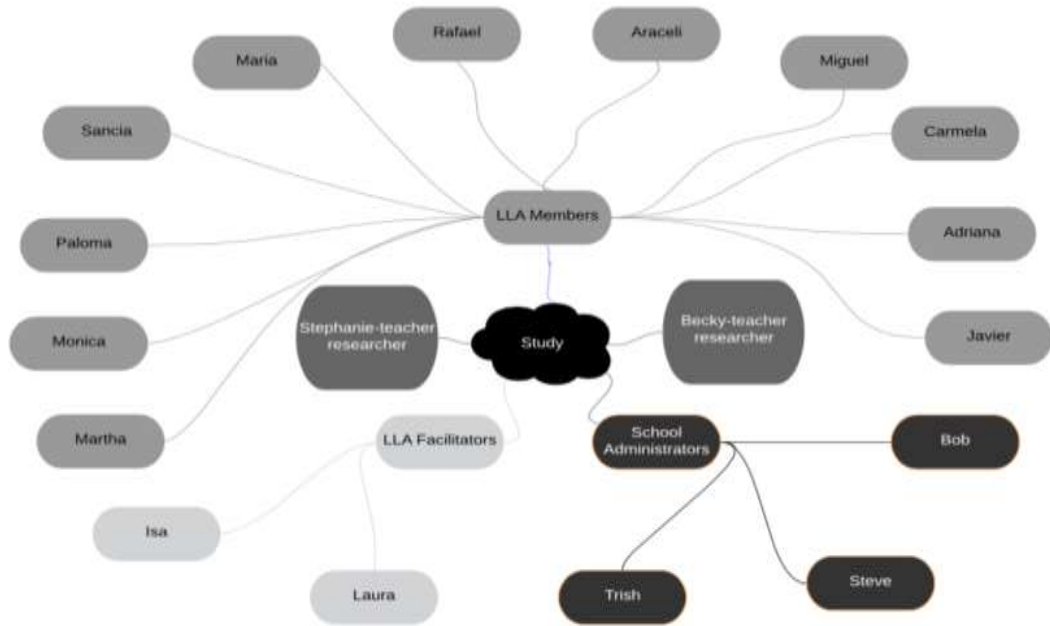


Figure 1. Study participants

We analyzed and considered all the data we collected from our in-depth conversations. From this analysis three key ideas became evident.

1. Latina/o leaders value school-based interactions with educators, but primarily define parent involvement as supporting their children in the home environment.
2. In the Valley School District (VSD) school administrators' beliefs about successful parental involvement are shifting beyond the traditional definition to include home-based support; however the administrators continue to strive for more Latina/o parent participation in the school setting.
3. Whereas a variety of perspectives were discussed about the role culture plays in the perceived lack of Latina/o parental involvement, the majority of our interviewees agreed that a primary factor barring parental involvement was the cost of living in a resort community and the subsequent hours and jobs that parents must work to afford living in such a community.

We will look briefly at each of these key ideas. First, the Latina/o parents that we spoke with firmly believe that education starts at home. Several of the interviewees commented on how parents are the first teachers and they establish the importance of education before a child ever really steps foot in a formalized school setting. We hypothesized that some of these beliefs might originate from the philosophy of the Head Start program that many of our participants have familiarity with, either as current or former parents or as teachers. Our parent interview participants explained that effective parental involvement includes many home-based interactions, such as spending quality time with their children, knowing what their children are doing and who they are with, even when the parents are not around, and showing an interest in their children's activities. Even though they acknowledged that not all parents feel as they do, the LLA leaders felt it was important for parents and teachers to work together to help their children to be as successful as possible.

The results of our parent interviews align with the findings from previous research, which also states that involvement is a home-based activity. This is important because it shows the parents have social capital, strengths of the individuals or "knowledge of their own abilities and context" (Venter, Joubert, & Chetty, 2014, p. 1230), from which the schools can pull. When you incorporate this social capital you create what Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gerrard (2009) refer to as "an inclusive partnership, [where] all participants serve as resources and the particular strengths, skills, and talents of each are actively utilized" (p. 235). Understanding the Latina/o perspective will help the elementary school principals as their definition of parental involvement continues to evolve.

Second, although all three principals we interviewed sought to have more Latina/o parents present in their schools, none of them seem to hold true to beliefs about parental

involvement traditionally held by White educators. Traditional beliefs assert that parental involvement is visible, promotes the school's agenda, and conforms to White, middle-class belief systems (Valencia, 1997). Some activities in alignment with traditional concepts of involvement are parental participation in parent-teacher conferences, parent nights, school performances, volunteering in the schools, attending Parent-Teacher Association meetings, and etc. (Frew, Zhou, Duran, Kwok, & Benz, 2013). All three of the principals spoke about how the realities of families are changing and parental involvement can take many forms, even if we are not fully aware of them. One of the principals we spoke with acknowledged that her perception was changing about parental involvement, but she wanted more input from the community. She wondered of Latina/os, "What they would like to see? What do they hope for? What are some possibilities?" The views of these administrators seems to be in sharp contrast to Valencia's (1997) research and leaning more toward the call of critical race theorists that ask educators to acknowledge the validity of alternate definitions of parental involvement and continue to seek the nondominant perspectives present in their school populations (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Orozco, 2008) .

Third, in accordance with literature in the field, we initially hypothesized that culture might play a role in parents' struggle to be active participants in the school setting. Traditionally it has been argued that many Latina/o parents defer to the knowledge and leadership of school teachers and administration, allowing the experts at school to do their work, while the parents are more active or involved at home (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson 2013). Similarly, Mexican immigrant parents may not be sure of how their involvement with the school and the education of their children should be structured (Dotson-Blake, 2010). Although elements of both of these findings did come up occasionally in our discussions, most

interviewees felt the barriers were created by the expense of living in a resort community. Two of our participants explained a Catch-22 scenario, whereby parents have to work multiple jobs to be able to support their families, which leaves them with little time to meaningfully engage with their children. If they did have more time, then they would not have enough money to meet the basic needs of housing and food for their families. The need to provide for their families creates a cycle where they do not have the time to devote to their children and parental involvement in the schools. Other barriers discussed were language and lack of understanding of how the school system actually works. Whatever the root causes, these barriers need to be recognized and addressed as we seek to increase parental involvement in our district.

Research Insights and Viewpoints

In our community, the strict, traditional definitions of parent involvement that have been commonplace in education are beginning to shift. Parents are more able to express what involvement means to them, and administrators are recognizing involvement takes place on many levels and in many locations, not necessarily always at the school. This finding aligns to Zarate's (2007) study whereby Latina/o parents tended to conceptualize parental involvement as primarily activities occurring in the home environment. Latina/o parents in our study described parental involvement by naming activities that Zarate classified as either life participation or academic involvement within the home.

As our local school district population grows and changes it is important to establish dialogue so that everyone feels they are an important asset in the education of our youth. Through this study's collaborative nature, a dialogic process has begun. At the end of the project, seven of the LLA graduates and two of the participating school administrators met face to face to discuss current successes and challenges between the Latina/o community and the school district.

In order to create a safe atmosphere where all voices could be heard, the round table was structured using a strategy consistent with the principles of CRT; restorative justice. We used the restorative justice methods of sitting in a circle and using a talking piece to maintain an egalitarian atmosphere despite perceived discrepancies in power between the dominant and nondominant cultures.

Principals eagerly asked questions of the Latina/o leaders and both groups worked to brainstorm future collaborative efforts. For instance, one principal inquired about what parent involvement means to Latina/o parents, while another asked, how do we use parent volunteers to promote more cultural awareness in our schools? One idea suggested for the dual immersion school was to have two parent representatives per classroom to help teach about the culture. This would be a way to pull on the cultural strengths of the parents and purposefully include them in the classroom instruction. Another suggestion was to “shine a light on Latino pride.” One LLA member said, “Maybe you are not good at soccer, but your mom is great at making quesadillas.” Her idea is to highlight the strengths and talents of the parents and encourage their involvement that way.

Equipped with new insights, principals left with ideas about how to recruit and empower Latina/o parent volunteers by elevating strengths beyond academics, such as language, personal passions, and culture. One recommendation was to make sure that parents are personally invited to get involved and realize their children’s success can be improved by this involvement. They also left with the understanding that many Latina/os have difficulty accessing their children’s grades through PowerSchool or getting on to Canvas to see what their children are doing, and question the overemphasis of technology in the district.

A final suggestion was to alter the time of events throughout the year so that working parents have more opportunities to attend school events. For example, possibly have one concert in the morning, another one later in the year in the afternoon or after school. This idea also translated to parent/teacher conferences. Some of the parents have kids in the elementary, middle, and high schools. When conferences are at the same times for all of these levels the parents are forced to choose which to attend and which ones to forgo, leaving them with the feeling that they are not supporting all of their children equally.

After listening to different viewpoints, both the Latina/o leaders and the school principals left with new ideas about how to inspire their respective peers to create a more collaborative and inclusive school environment. Upon completing 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 all.

Moving Forward

During the course of our conversations many of the Latina/o leaders described how school meetings in Mexico are mandatory and that if they do not attend there is some sort of consequence such as paying a fine, working off time at the school, or banning the child from attending classes for a while. We do not mean to suggest that this is a concept that would work in the United States; however it did lead to some interesting discussions. The Latina/o leaders communicated the importance of having meaningful events for parents. They suggested learning tied to some fun family activity and making sure the parents knew what they would be getting out of the evening. Perhaps offering childcare would help parents attend as well.

From our perspective, the most important thing educators and administrators can do is to take an inquiry stance focused on learning more about the hopes and desires of those in the nondominant culture (Gutiérrez, 2008). Show those in nondominant cultures that you value them by engaging them in conversations without preconceived, stereotypical notions. Ask them what involvement looks like to them and what that means in a forum that creates safety and diffuses traditional power structures. Administrators: Invite parents to help you brainstorm how your school can become a community and not just a place their children go to for seven hours a day.

Implications

We acknowledge that our research was completed with a relatively small number of participants, however we believe the implications of our work may be useful for other communities as well. Once new partnerships with nondominant populations are formed it is import to foster and maintain those for the benefit of your schools. Perhaps consider parent nights with teachers that are fluent in the nondominant populations' native language to provide more direct and coherent information. Increase parent outreach at the secondary level. Even though our research focused on elementary, parents shared a lot of concerns about communication at the higher levels of education.

The bottom line is there are people from our nondominant cultures that want to be involved. As one of our participants put it, "I'm an activist and I clean houses on the side." Imagine how powerful it could be to harness that potential in our schools.

Bios

Rebecca Broderick a former elementary teacher and instructional coach, has recently completed her Ed.D. at the University of Wyoming. Stephanie Hardeman is a former elementary teacher

and principal and is currently the school district's lead instructional coach. She has also completed her Ed.D at the University of Wyoming.

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