Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Family Perspectives on Home-School Connections and Family Engagement: A Case Study of Four Middle Class Latin American Families

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CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILY PERSPECTIVES
ON HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF FOUR MIDDLE CLASS
LATIN AMERICAN FAMILIES
by
Janet Elizabeth Pierce Clark

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Education
In
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In the
Bagwell College of Education
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Janet Clark  # 000208216

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Titled:

Culturally And Linguistically Diverse Family Perspectives On Home-School Connections And Family Engagement: A Case Study Of Four Middle Class Latin American Families

submitted to the Bagwell College of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Education

has been read and approved by the Committee:

Dissertation Chair Signature

DATE

Committee Member Signature

DATE

Committee Member Signature

DATE

Committee Member Signature

DATE
DEDICATION

To Howard, the love of my life and my best friend

To Heather and Robin, our beloved daughters

To my dear sister Amy and brothers Don and Richard

To my parents, Norwin and Dorothy, whose love for learning inspired our family

And to families everywhere
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I have been enormously grateful for the opportunity to grow in academic knowledge and professional practice during the past four years thanks to the doctoral program at Kennesaw State University’s Bagwell College of Education. Those of us in the first cohort of students earning the degree owe special thanks to Dr. Harriet Bessette, Dr. Arlinda Eaton, and Dr. Nita Paris for their efforts, dedication, and support, which brought the vision of an Ed.D. program at Kennesaw State to reality.

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I was fortunate to grow up in a family in which both intellectual curiosity and humor are highly valued. I thank my sister, Amy Lewis, and my brothers, Dr. Don Pierce and Dr. Richard Pierce for reminding me of the lessons learned from our parents, Dr. Norwin Pierce and Dorothy Ann Pierce. Our parents’ love for learning was a gift for the four of us.

Finally, my husband, Howard, and our daughters, Heather Clark and Robin Clark have been a source of constant love, encouragement, and advice. I thank them for sustaining me.
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The purpose of this case study was to explore the context, perceptions, and
understandings of school-home connections and family engagement of four middle class
Latin American families who have children in U.S. public schools. Because family
engagement with schools correlates with student success, the participants’ perspectives
were examined in depth. The study was guided by two major research questions and
associated sub questions:

1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their
child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?
   a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between
      home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for
      four middle class families from Latin America?

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle
   class families from Latin America?
   a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home
      and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

Data sources were open-ended and in-depth biographical interviews, informal conversations, observations, and collages.

There appears to be a paucity of qualitative research examining the perspectives of middle class Latin American immigrants. Therefore, the present case study enriches the current literature on Latin American families. The study was framed by critical theory and guided by the work of Freire (1998/2005) and Moll (Gonzalez et al., 2005). While the data indicated connectedness is especially important to the participants, the degree to which the schools connect with them is complex. The findings suggest that respect is a critical factor for school-home connections, and when families’ funds of knowledge are honored, their sense of connection and desire to engage with the school appear to be strengthened.

*Keywords:* family engagement; funds of knowledge; Latin American; critical theory
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I locked my hands and feet onto the frame of the door. I used my small arms and legs as best I could, for I was determined not to die on that day. “Me quiero ir pa casa, Mami. … No me hagas esto, por favor” (I want to go home, Mom. … Don’t do this to me, please don’t), I pleaded to my mother. To this day, she clearly remembers how difficult it was for her to leave me in a strange school, filled with strange people who did not speak her language, or mine. To this day, she refuses to comment on the incident, for I truly believe it was harder on her than it was for me. (Figueroa-Britapaja, 2002, pp. 249-250)

José Figueroa-Britapaja (2002) thus begins the story of his boyhood migration to the United States (U.S.) over 30 years ago. His mother’s fear and anxiety over leaving him in a strange school are later matched with his father’s despair regarding educational decisions made about their son. Because José, a bright child, could not speak English and thus did not interact with academic activities, he was placed into a lower grade without his parents’ input and considered for a referral to special education. Figueroa-Britapaja envisions how his father must have felt at the time:

Can you imagine the surprise in my father’s face when he received the reclassification letter? He could not understand how a child’s educational and
mental condition could change overnight. Ironically, his confusion was only exacerbated when he approached school officials. (p. 250)

Figueroa-Britapaja relates that these school officials were overtly disrespectful to his father in the interchange. They “blatantly stipulated” for his father to comply with the “parental responsibility” to acculturate his son to the U.S. system and learn English within 30 days (p. 250). This outlandish demand was not only unreasonable, but it negated the family’s Spanish language and demeaned their pride in their culture. In his narrative, Figueroa-Britapaja recounts additional experiences of being marginalized, stereotyped, and bullied during the school year in events that were beyond his parents’ control. Fortunately, after many struggles, several teachers advocated for him, and eventually he was able to succeed in school, even entering a gifted program in later years. Nevertheless, his depiction of the new immigrant experience was a critical and oppressive beginning to his family’s interactions with the school. Figueroa-Britapaja recalls that first year in the U.S. as dehumanizing: “As I reflect on this process, I begin to wonder just how many parents are left (today) with the uncertainty of their child’s educational well-being?” (p. 250). Uncertainty, disrespect, discrimination, and stereotyping – these are all marginalizing conditions that impede a family’s sense of connection to their child’s school.

Are there similar voices today, or are today’s schools culturally responsive and welcoming? What are the experiences of today’s immigrant families as their children enter the U.S. public school system? Poignant stories such as Figueroa-Britapaja’s (2002) provide impetus to learn more about the present perspectives of those who are from a
non-dominant culture, specifically immigrants from Latin America, currently the largest U.S. immigrant group.

A deepened understanding of the nature of home and school interactions is urgent as our nation’s educational system strives to increase student achievement in P-12 schools. School-home interaction is vital for successful family engagement, and the literature shows that family engagement is strongly correlated with successful schools and successful students (Allen, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Mapp, 2003). Significantly, Mapp found that positive interactions between schools and families increase the parents’ desire to be engaged with the school. Furthermore, family engagement has been linked to student benefits, such as, “higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, higher graduation rates, … and more positive attitudes about school” (Mapp, p. 36). Additionally, increased parent involvement in schools is one of the six areas of emphasis in the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). The stakes are even higher for immigrant students or English Language Learners and their families, and higher still if these students are in need of special education services. Special education law requires that schools seek parental input and participation throughout the identification and Individualized Education Program (IEP) process (Olivos, 2009). Hence, for culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education, interaction between school and home is not only good practice, it is a legal mandate.

The present study enriches and builds upon current literature by exploring the perspectives of four middle class Latin American immigrant families, two from Brazil, one from Colombia, and one from Venezuela, as they relate how connected and engaged
they feel they are with the schools their children attend. Empirical studies that focus on the perspectives of Latin American families, particularly in the area of family engagement with schools, are emerging in the literature. Research that allows individuals who are often marginalized or stereotyped to “tell their stories” seeks to unmask oppression that may exist, whether that oppression is intentional or unintentional, subtle or blatant. Parental perceptions of experiences with their child’s school may offer insights for improved educational practice, yet these perspectives are often silenced or muted in the literature (Auerbach, 2002). My study stands out because it gives voice to a group not typically heard in the literature, that is, Latin Americans who are educated and middle class. Despite this group’s upward mobility and positive educational aspiration for their children, Latin Americans, in general, continue to face devaluation of their culture and language as they interact with institutions of power in the U.S. (Nieto, 2006, 2008; Yosso, 2005). The school, as a fundamental institution of acculturation and education for all children, holds the key to forming partnerships with families so that successful futures for their children can be imagined (Epstein, 2001).

It is thus crucial to examine the communicative interactions between school and home. What leads to positive connections, and what tensions exist? The literature supports that connections of trust between families and schools are built on positive interactions (Allen, 2007; Mapp, 2003). Fear, confusion, disrespect, and marginalization all work against positive interactions between families and schools. Sometimes, however, families from a non-dominant culture do not express their concerns or experiences. They may feel it is inappropriate to question “authority” or demand respect (Freire, 1968/2000), or they may perceive barriers that interfere with the dialogue, such as fear or
language and cultural differences. If positive interactions that lead to home-school
correlations and increased family engagement are to be realized, it is critical to
understand how parents view these interactions. Listening to the perspectives and
experiences of all families, not just those with prominent presence in the school building,
offers educators the opportunity to change what may be wrong and reinforce what is
being done well.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the present study is to explore the context, perceptions, and
understandings of school-home connections and family engagement among four middle
class immigrant families from Latin America who have children in U.S. public schools.
Specifically, the goal is to examine the way these families perceive schools’ efforts to
connect with them and the factors that evoke these perceptions.

It is important to investigate these perceptions given that schools in the U.S. are
becoming increasingly diverse, and culturally and linguistically diverse families must
have a voice regarding schools’ efforts to promote family engagement. Enrollment of
English Language Learners increased by 57% between 1995 and 2005, and in 20 states,
this population more than doubled in this time period (“Portrait of a Population,” 2009, p.
3). While the teacher population generally remains white and middle class, the diversity
of students in U.S. schools has brought new dimensions to the traditionally homogeneous
student population. Passel and Cohn (2008) project that by 2050, 19% of the U.S.
population will be immigrants, and by 2023, over half of all children will be of minority
ethnicity. The group increasing most rapidly is the Latin American population, which is
projected to nearly triple from 2005 to 2050 (Passel & Cohn). Immigrant students and
their families represent a variety of cultural, racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic backgrounds, and today’s classrooms have students with more diverse experiences than ever before. If family engagement with schools is crucial for student success, then schools must make the effort to bridge the cultural differences and extend the invitation to connect with all families.

The study is specifically guided by two major research questions and associated sub questions:

1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?
   a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?
   a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

Significance of the Study

The present study is based on the assumption that teachers should work with, rather than for, students and families from the non-dominant culture to achieve success (Allen, 2007; Freire, 1968/2000; Moll, 2010). Importantly, it seeks to uncover the degree
to which this is happening most uniquely through the lens of four middle class Latin American families whose children attend public school in the southeastern U.S. Their perceptions of the existence (or non-existence) of the school’s invitation to connect with them and the factors that influence their perspectives are topical and relevant. Questions such as, “In what ways do culturally and linguistically diverse families view that their child’s school respects the families’ culture, competencies and skills (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005)?” and, “What kind of communication promotes dialogue that builds positive relationships between families and schools?” will provide insight for improved practice for educators, administrators, school staff, counselors, preservice teachers, and teacher education programs. Educators may discover strategies that benefit all students and families and strengthen family-school connections. As Ramirez (2003) asserts, asking parents to articulate their interests and needs helps practitioners gain better understanding as they develop yearly goals or make curriculum changes (p. 94). This portends positive social and academic outcomes for all students.

All four families of the present study are considered to have had middle class status in their home countries. This differentiates my study from extant studies that examine Latin American participants who are disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic status or access to resources valued by U.S. society. This distinction is important to the present study. The parents in each family have at least a high school education, which affords them better prospects for upward mobility in the U.S. (Bourdieu, 1986; Crosnoe, 2005) than Latin American families with less than high school education (Orozco, 2008). Thus, the participants’ high school completion is a useful parameter in the present study. Additionally, the participants are not grappling with the disadvantages of poverty or
racially segregated schools, factors that present concerns in many other studies of Latin Americans (Crosnoe, pp. 269-303). This distinction benefits the current study in that experiences and perceptions are not clouded by obstacles typically related to poverty, such as severe resource scarcity, crowded or unsafe living environments, or school attendance areas that are considered highly problematic, i.e. schools that are unsafe, have inexperienced teachers and/or high teacher turnover (Crosnoe; Evans, 2004).

Furthermore, interactions between parents and schools are affected by the assumptions and perceptions held by each party. The literature upholds that parents view their child’s school through the lens of their own schooling experiences in addition to current interactions (Auerbach, 2002; Dodd & Konzal, 1999; Fine & Weis, 1998). Thus, the present study examines communication issues, successes, and tensions as experienced and perceived by the participants, both currently and when they first arrived in the U.S.

The literature uncovers that many teachers hold erroneous views of non-dominant cultures (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005) despite the fact that a child’s teacher is likely “the person in the school whom Latino families trust most” (Olivos, 2009, p. 114). For example, while culturally and linguistically diverse parents want their children to have a rigorous curriculum (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Quiocco & Daoud, 2006), assumptions are often made by teachers that the students are not ready for comprehension, even when their comprehension ability excels in their native language. Olivos avers that “the parent-child-teacher triad is a powerful relationship that can effectively be used for building collaboration with Latino families” (p. 114), yet much research shows communication and cultural differences to be factors in teachers’ negative perceptions of the culturally and linguistically diverse population (Batt, 2008; Monroe,
This research highlights the significance of examining how the participants of the present study view home-school interactions. In addition to the school context, there exists a larger societal negative perception of immigrants in general (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Trueba & McLaren, 2000). Since Biblical times, sojourners in a foreign land have struggled for acceptance, although some groups are more readily received than others. In the U.S., a distinct negativity toward Latin Americans has resulted from: historical social and political conflicts between the U.S. and various Latin American countries, especially Mexico; a 100-year wave of immigration that alternates between welcoming and tightened borders depending on the economy; and the issues of poverty, language acquisition, and racial prejudice (Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2009).

The rapid increase of Latin American immigrants coincides with an often-negative U.S. view of this population, a view called “Latinophobia” by Trueba and McLaren (2000, p. 51). On the one hand, the popular press stresses an increasing demand for students to be better prepared for a global society, which includes knowledge and appreciation of languages and cultures different from their own, part of what Reimers calls “global civility” (2006, p. 8). At the same time, across the U.S. there exists a fervent political movement toward a standardized English-only culture. As of this writing, passionate debates continue regarding the passage of an anti-immigration law in Arizona and the subsequent federal lawsuit to block its enforcement. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2000) describe the strong correlation between anxiety about the U.S. economy, especially the unemployment rate, and the degree of anti-Latino sentiment. The authors contend that U.S. citizens are much more accepting of immigrants from Europe,
who “do not look different from the dominant Anglo” population (p. 25). They further argue that the effect on children of this public antipathy toward immigrant families has been neglected in the literature.

An associated negative view present in U.S. society concerns the phenomenon of undocumented immigrants. Although the participants of the present study came with appropriate documentation, they arrived in the U.S. at a time when many U.S. citizens (some school personnel included) assumed any Latin American immigrant is undocumented. Trueba and McLaren (2000) point out that this anti-immigrant sentiment is especially aimed at Latin Americans, the largest and fastest growing immigrant population in the U.S. The authors discuss that Latin Americans are at once encouraged to “be there” by guest worker programs and “not be there (be voiceless and transparent) as ghost workers” (p. 57). Trueba and McLaren maintain, therefore, “the construction of a critical ethnography for the study of Latino populations … is an urgent task for current and future generations of researchers” (p. 58). The present study responds to this call by examining school connection and family engagement through the eyes of four middle class families who dared to risk coming to a new land seeking a better life for themselves and their children.

Additionally, and of particular importance to the present study, is the typical labeling of state and national testing sub-groups, in which all Latin American populations are grouped together and reported merely as *Hispanic*. Educators often fail to consider the vast differences in culture, or even language, of Latin American students’ country of origin. Sometimes educators’ reported negative views are unconscious and not driven by ill intent. Yet, the mistaken perception, for example, that culturally and linguistically
diverse parents do not want to be involved in school functions or do not want academic rigor easily leads to tensions and disenfranchisement for students and parents alike (Bernhard & Freire, 1999). Connections are formed and relationships developed when parties recognize and honor the uniqueness of each other. The literature confirms that generalizations about Latin Americans work against building authentic home-school partnerships (Moll, 2010; Olivos, 2009; Ramirez, 2003).

The reported data regarding academic concerns of the Latin American population as a whole naturally provide the thrust for countless research studies, programs, initiatives, and improved pedagogy. However, the grouping of all Latin Americans together in both data reporting and much of the research obscures the diversity that exists within the population. For instance, for Central American populations, dropout rates vary from 4% to 35% depending on the country. However, students originating from many countries in South America have dropout rates comparable to non-Latin American U.S. whites (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The cultural characteristics unique to one’s country and the social and political impetus for leaving that country vary greatly as well.

By examining the participants’ perceptions of stereotyping, the present study extends and broadens the discussion of the relationship between Latin American families and P-12 schools in the U.S. Often unacknowledged by educators, but emerging in the literature, are assets associated with many immigrant Latin American practices, such as the ability to negotiate multiple environments, resilience, strong commitment to families, including extended families, and an emphasis on the children’s healthy nutrition, respect, and good behavior (Fuller & Coll, 2010).
Schools have invisible cultures, as do families, and the culture of the school represents the culture of power (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1968/2000; Martin & Nakayama, 2004; Zeichner, 1996). Delpit maintains that “there are codes, or rules” for participating in this culture of power owned by the dominant society (p. 25). These rules are “linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self, that is, ways of talking, writing, dressing, and ways of interacting” (p. 25). Delpit argues that school culture is based on a white upper and middle class cultural system, and those who acquire the “codes” (p. 25) of the culture of power will more easily achieve success in school and in society.

Conversely, disengagement can arise when communication, expectations, behaviors, and perspectives differ, especially when the discourse of groups in a position of power differs from that of less dominant groups, such as Latin Americans (Freire, 1968/2000; Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Delpit (1995) points out that communication between people from different cultures “frequently breaks down. Each cultural group is left saying, ‘Why don’t those people say what they mean?’ as well as, ‘What’s wrong with them, why don’t they understand?’” (p. 25).

Communication conflicts and disengagement of families due to cultural differences can easily result in marginalization, in which culturally and linguistically diverse individuals are not able to fully participate in school activities or decision making. Marginalization relegates these families to outsider status, separating them from the privileges more easily afforded those from the dominant culture (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Such marginalization is correlated with school failure, isolation, and “anxiety over expectations and norms of appropriate behavior” for those of a
non-dominant culture (Trueba & McLaren, 2000, p. 61).

In a discussion of literature measuring perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse parents, Harry (2008) reviewed some studies that professed parental satisfaction as measurement of effective home-school collaboration. Pertinent to the present study, Harry asserts that historically oppressed or marginalized groups might have lower expectations for satisfaction or express satisfaction that is really a “function of deference to authority” (p. 374). To help ameliorate these limitations in the present study, rapport and trust were maintained through warmth and openness. Additionally, although it was divulged that I am an educator, it was requested that the families who were the participants of this study not indicate which school their children attend in hopes they would feel free to be candid. Finally, a reflective awareness of my background and white ethnic identity vis-à-vis the challenges presented by “the whiteness of ethnography” was maintained (Trueba & McLaren, 2000, p. 44). This term, as explained by Trueba and McLaren, refers to the fact that the typically Euro-American ethnicity of researchers represents the dominant culture of U.S. society, a culture that has historically oppressed and denied agency to people of color.

While my white ethnicity could be perceived by some as a limitation of the present study, the worldview that I bring allows for an examination of Latin American families through a different dimension. With fresh eyes, I enter the world of first generation immigrants through their narrated experiences and perceptions. The theoretical orientation – critical theory – and the methodology used heighten the significance of the study. While I acknowledge being a member of the culture of power, I step aside and take a critical stance to examine how the institutions of power interact with
the study’s participants and what tensions exist. This critical lens leads me, as a white woman of power, on a unique journey.

Research Design Overview

Creswell (2007) provides guidance for research decision making regarding philosophical assumptions, conceptual frameworks, and paradigms. His matrix describes assumptions and implications for conducting qualitative research and asks the researcher to consider the nature of reality, the relationship between researcher and participants, the role of values, the language to be used, and the process of research chosen (p. 17). Applying Creswell’s matrix, it was determined that uncovering the perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse families’ sense of connectedness and family engagement with their children’s schools would require collaboration, spending time with the participants in a natural environment, and becoming a confidante of personal information as much as possible. Additionally, it was determined that a close examination of interactions between U.S. schools, which represent the dominant culture, and participants from a non-dominant culture would be best viewed through a critical lens.

A planning template was used to consider what research design, data sources, and types of data would be collected (see Appendix A). In order to obtain “thick” descriptions (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30), the present study uses multiple sources to investigate how the participants view the school’s efforts to connect with them; their sense of family engagement with the school; the tensions inherent in home-school interactions; the degree to which they believe the school values them; and what experiences have led them to their beliefs. Through open-ended and biographical interviews, informal conversations, observations, and collages, their satisfaction and disappointments were expressed along
with their accounts of struggle and resilience. The study required becoming immersed in their life stories, meeting with parents, a grandmother, sons, and daughters, and listening to their stories and reflecting on their individual and collective perspectives.

Before the data collection began, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the university, and four participant families were purposefully selected. Sessions with the participants were audiotaped, and field notes were taken. Data analysis occurred as data were collected and transcribed. Color coding was used to identify significant data, which were then organized by themes using Excel® software. The ongoing coding and analysis allowed for clarification and member checking at subsequent sessions with the participants.

Trustworthiness of the study was supported though multiple data sources, comparison of data with relevant literature, and member checking with the participants. Additionally, consultation with key informants and other educators provided an examination of alternate explanations to preliminary findings.

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any case study, the sample size of the present investigation is small, so the results may not be generalizable. What can be gleaned, however, is an understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse families’ thought processes and emotions based on their history and social experiences. By opening a visceral window that allows awareness of how people think and feel in certain situations, the study may provide understanding that is transferable to other contexts. Using middle class Latin American families as a compass within the present study, we can gain consciousness regarding other non-dominant immigrant populations.
As noted, there is considerable diversity among culturally and linguistically diverse families in terms of culture, language, socio-economic status, immigration status, income, level of education, and amount of time the family has lived in the U.S. No one paradigm applies to all (Olivos, 2009). This causes the present study to be limited to the experiences and perspectives of the chosen participants. While there is significant diversity among Latin American cultures themselves, an exploration of the topic with families from cultures significantly dissimilar to Latin America, such as Asian or Middle Eastern, may yield substantially different data.

Further, while the participants of the present study do understand and speak English, the difference between my native language and theirs presents another limitation. It is possible that the participants were not able to fully articulate their emotions or perceptions to me in English and therefore chose to withhold certain thoughts during the interviews. In addition, the participants may have perceived me as an authority figure, given my position as an educator in the dominant cultural group. Finally, I acknowledge that I cannot fully understand all the nuances of a social-cultural system different from my own.

In order to obtain a deep understanding of individuals’ perspectives, delimitations are necessary in case studies. The present study, therefore, includes only four families, and the families represent first generation immigrants to the U.S. from Latin America. Furthermore, the primary informant in each family has at least a high school education, a delimitation that is not commonly found to be specified in the literature on Latin American families.
Overarching Assumptions

Four overarching assumptions are made for the purposes of the present study. First, it is assumed that positive home-school connections must be built on interactions that convey respect for families. Respect is an attitude or approach that is valued in all cultures (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). To respect another means to hold in regard another person’s self-worth and dignity. Respect for others can be shown through politeness, esteem, verbal and nonverbal friendliness and/or attention on the others’ needs. For example, with regards to culturally and linguistically families, respect might be shown by friendly interactions, and by providing an interpreter if needed, providing support for learning activities at home, and honoring (without stereotyping) a family’s cultural uniqueness.

Secondly, it is the responsibility of the school to confer respect and work to build home-school connections. The school is the institution of power. Therefore, it is up to the school, both legally and morally, to create an environment that feels safe and welcoming and encourages family engagement. Connections between home and school are not guaranteed if the family does not reciprocate, but the onus to extend the invitation, and continue to extend the invitation, is on the school.

Third, the respect that builds positive connections is based on the school’s acknowledgment that families, especially culturally and linguistically diverse families, have strengths, skills, life experiences, and competencies, i.e. funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Acknowledgment of families’ strengths and abilities disrupts the common deficit view of families and instead places schools in the “disposition to respect others” (Freire, 1998/2005, p. 118).
Finally, it is assumed that family engagement with a child’s school results in beneficial outcomes for students, schools, and families. When families are engaged with their children’s schools, the responsibility for education becomes a shared human endeavor. Children benefit with a better chance of academic and social success, and schools and families benefit with new learning from the enriched interactions.

These four overarching assumptions are based on a review of the literature, my five years of teaching English to Latin American adults, and my 23 years as an educator in the U.S. public school system.

Definition of Terms

Creswell (2009) suggests supplying a definition of terms that are important to a study as a means of providing precision for the reader (p. 39). Since words often have multiple meanings, the following explanations are offered as working definitions to assist in clarifying and situating their meaning within this body of work.

Connect; Connection; Connectedness

As major aspects of the present examination, the terms, connect, connection, and connectedness, are used in the research questions and throughout the following chapters. For the purposes of this study, the verb, connect, means to establish rapport, to link, or to establish a relationship. Villegas and Lucas (2002) use the metaphor, “building bridges,” to describe the active process of connecting home and school (p. 79). Trumbull et al. (2003) also use the bridge-building metaphor to illustrate how schools connect with families.
A *connection* is the link, association, or relationship that is formed by two or more connecting parties ([http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/connection](http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/connection)). Connections between school and home may be direct, such as personal communication and partnerships, or indirect and less personal, such as routine homework assignments or basic information sharing (Epstein, 2001). Epstein calls these connections overlapping spheres of influence (p. 29).

The term, *connectedness*, as used in this study, is a sense of bonding, belonging, or attachment that one feels when connecting alliances are formed. In psychiatric and psychological literature, *connectedness* is often referred to as “attachment” and describes the bonding between a child and parent, but a sense of connectedness also may occur between children and schools and between parents and schools (Ed.gov, 2009). Educational literature regarding school connectedness typically refers to perceptions and beliefs held by students (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Dixon, 2007); when students feel a sense of connectedness to their school, they perceive that adults in the school care about them (Blum & Libbey). However, a parent’s feeling of connectedness to a child’s school is also considered vitally important “so they can provide encouragement to their offspring in pursuing their studies and advocate for them” (Ed.gov, p. 3). A sense of connectedness to a child’s school is influenced by individuals (including school staff), the school environment, and the school culture (Ed.gov, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education, “teachers, other staff, and parents become more engaged in schools where connectedness is a priority” (Ed.gov, p. 3).
Culture; Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

The terms, *culture* and *culturally and linguistically diverse*, are used frequently in this body of work. *Culture* refers to a person’s socially constructed worldview that includes beliefs and behaviors, symbolic significance, communication patterns, relationships between humans, time orientation, and historical information passed down through generations (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Those whose culture and/or native language differs from the existing predominant culture are considered culturally and linguistically diverse. Since the participants of the present study are living in the U.S. but are first generation immigrants from Latin America, and English is not their native language, they are considered to be culturally and linguistically diverse.

Family; Parent

In this body of work, *family* and *parent* will be used differentially depending on the context, focus, or situation that is being addressed. The term family is more inclusive, and it encompasses all the related significant adults who help rear children. The intention of the present study was to include consideration of family and extended family as much as feasible to enrich the understanding of parents’ perspectives of family engagement with the school.

Family Engagement

The literature uses the term *family engagement* to mean an “ongoing, reciprocal strengths-based partnership” between families and educational programs (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009, p. 3). Throughout Epstein’s (2001) body of work, she examines multiple areas of engagement: communication (home to school communication and school to home communication); parent volunteering; parental participation in school
decision making; the parenting and home learning environment/activities; and school collaboration with the child’s community. Using these definitions as the basis for understanding the term, the present study will examine how the families perceive the schools encourage them to become engaged and what tensions exist in the interactions.

**Fictive Kinship**

While family refers to people who are related, *fictive kinship* is defined as a closely networked relationship of people who are not biologically related but have a similar language, culture, or worldview (Boutte, 2002). Although certain cultures tend to establish extensive networks of fictive kin, Boutte cautions that merely being a member of a cultural group, such as Latin American or African American, does not automatically guarantee “good standing” within the fictive kinship network, especially if one varies substantially from the group’s norms (p. 9). The present study looks at how participants utilize the support of Latin American friends and school employees as fictive kin.

**Funds of Knowledge**

*Funds of knowledge* is defined as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 72). The concept holds that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., pp. ix-x). Educators utilizing a funds of knowledge approach (Gonzalez et al.) view families and communities in terms of their resources rather than their deficits and find ways to incorporate these resources into classroom instruction. The concept holds that both the non-dominant and the dominant groups gain when funds of knowledge are shared. This gain is seen in new opportunities for
connections of trust between families and schools as well as new ways of thinking for educators. The adoption of the funds of knowledge concept facilitates “a more expansive and dynamic education for children” and changes “how educators come to depict families for themselves, for their work, and for other educators” (Moll, 2010, p. 455).

Cultural Capital

A somewhat similar term to funds of knowledge, cultural capital was first discussed by Bourdieu (1986) to describe the physical, social, and mental resources, including life experiences, possessed by individuals within a certain culture. While Bourdieu’s term was developed to explain how assets that are valued by society lead to success, the term, funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), is more often used in relation to the school’s utilization of a family’s competencies and interactions. For this reason, the concept, funds of knowledge, and an examination of the funds of knowledge approach are deemed more relevant for the present investigation.

Deficit View

The deficit view, when held by educators, means that students and families of a non-dominant culture are primarily viewed as lacking skills, competencies, or abilities needed for success in school (Delpit, 1995).

Strengths/Abilities Based View

In contrast to the deficit view, the strengths/abilities based view assumes that people have competence, skills, and life experiences that are positive and these strengths are at the core of their human dignity (Gonzalez et al., 2005).
Latin America

*Latin America* refers to the broad regions of the Americas south of the United States. In most Latin American countries, the Romance language either of Spanish, Portuguese, French, or Creole is primary. Although English is the predominant language of several of the Latin American countries, such as Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad, St. Lucia, and the Bahamas, for the purposes of this paper, Latin Americans will refer to those whose native language and cultural identities are Brazilian (Portuguese) or Spanish American. Much of the educational research on Latin Americans who live in the U.S. examines children of immigrants and migrants, as well as second generation Latin Americans. The participants of the present study, however, are Latin American parents who have moved to the U.S. within the last nine years and are thus considered first generation immigrants.

Marginalization

The literature contains references to the phenomenon of marginalization as the relegation of a person or group to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group ([http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalized](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalized)). According to Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008), researchers use the term to refer to those who are considered “outsiders due to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, or physical ability” (p. 7). Using a critical theory lens, I closely listened for instances in which school-family interaction might be interpreted as marginalizing behavior.

Narratives

The research of the present study relied significantly on these participants’ narratives, which are stories told as interpreted recollections of the past (Riessman,
1993). Auerbach (2002) notes that personal narratives are an important part of critical research because they “challenge the assumptions of dominant discourse” by allowing multiple and/or disenfranchised voices to be heard (p. 1371). Further, narrative storytelling helps organize and make sense of human experience and allows for “reflexive relationships between the researched and the researcher” (p. 1371).

Overview of Chapters

This body of work contains six chapters, which address the major research questions. Chapters two and three will contain a review of current literature relevant to the present study and the methods used for investigating the research questions respectively. In chapters four and five, I present and discuss the findings of the study in terms of significant themes resulting from data analysis. Chapter six presents a summary and discussion of the investigation and a theoretical analysis of the findings. The final chapter also provides implications and recommendations for practice and policy, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review provides a background and context for the research questions of the present study, which are:

1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?
   a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?
   a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

Following the topical review of relevant literature, a conceptual, theoretical, and methodological review for the current study will be presented. The chapter begins with literature relevant to family engagement in U.S. schools with emphasis on the crucial need for schools to find positive ways to encourage family engagement. Following this section will be a discussion of the literature that relates to culturally and linguistically diverse families in general, then more specifically, to those from Latin America and how “connectedness” is embedded in their cultural identities. The next section reviews
literature that focuses on (a) tensions inherent in family engagement for culturally and linguistically diverse populations, (b) tensions inherent in family engagement for Latin American families in particular, and (c) factors that impede family engagement for Latin American families. The conceptual, theoretical, and methodological review of relevant literature for the current study will follow.

Family Engagement in U.S. Schools

For many years, educational researchers have contended that family engagement (previously known more commonly as parental involvement in the literature) with a child’s education leads to increased success for students (Chavkin, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Mapp, 2003). The early ideology behind parental involvement put the onus for involvement on the parents. Schools were thus exonerated from laying out the welcome mat. If the parents did not become involved in school activities, the blame in the past could be put on the parents alone. This vision of the responsibility for encouraging family engagement began to shift in the second half of the 20th century from “one of (parents) supporting the school administration to a wide range of participation” (Harry, 2008, p. 373) for families. With this shift came the realization that engaging families with schools yields positive rewards in terms of student success. Numerous studies began to unfold upholding the benefit of parental involvement/family engagement for both students and schools. For example, Jeynes’ studies were meta-analyses and concluded that the relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement is significant for both white students and students of color. Similarly, in their analysis of the literature, Turney and Kao (2009) found that “parental involvement” is positively linked with academic and behavior
success in elementary school and in adolescence and provides a “lasting influence” (p. 257). A crucial finding of Turney and Kao’s review, and pertinent to the present study, is that parental involvement is beneficial to the children of immigrants. Likewise, Henderson and Mapp’s meta-analysis found positive effects of family engagement across all cultural groups in the U.S. Henderson and Mapp further report that “the evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: many forms of family and community involvement influence student achievement at all ages” (p. 7).

It is important to note that the Henderson and Mapp (2002) quote above qualifies their finding by including the phrase “many forms” of involvement. This implies that not all engagement is correlated with increased achievement. In fact, after evaluating 41 parental involvement programs, Mattingly, Radmila, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) concluded that parental involvement does not necessarily lead to increased success for students. The argument that Mattingly et al. put forward is that many activities the schools listed as engagement, such as being a room parent and signing forms, were not found to correlate with increased student achievement. Henderson and Mapp, then, agree that educators must look critically at how engagement is defined and advise that partnerships relating to student learning present the best opportunities for increased student success.

Importantly, schools are often unaware of, or discount, the supportive role given at home when they define family engagement (Auerbach, 2002; Mapp, 2003; Orozco, 2008; Trumbull et al., 2003). If the school only considers those who attend Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, organize fund raisers, and volunteer in the front office to be engaged families, the school is practicing the hegemony condemned by Freire
Likewise, Mapp (2003) avers that it is crucial to consider the impact of active at-home engagement as well family engagement at the school:

By not recognizing diverse forms … that may take place beyond the school building and by not providing different outlets for family participation, schools may unwittingly restrict both the numbers of parents and the ways that parents can be involved in their children’s schooling. (p. 59)

The analysis of Henderson and Mapp (2002) is vitally relevant to the link between connection and family engagement because, first, the positive effects of parental engagement were found with all cultural groups and socioeconomic levels. As the present study examines middle class parents from the non-dominant culture, it is important to note that, according to the literature, their engagement in their children’s education is correlated with their children’s success (Henderson & Mapp). Secondly, the authors found that the most effective partnerships promote a collaborative atmosphere where parents may share in school decision making. The present study examines if the parents believe they shared in decisions made at their child’s school, an important aspect of true family engagement. Additionally, Henderson and Mapp (2002) report that successful family-school relationships that encourage school engagement are ones that are welcoming and build on family strengths while addressing specific needs of the families and communities. The authors found that initiatives that focus on “building respectful and trusting relationships” between the school and family are most effective in maintaining support for student achievement (p. 43).
Connections Between Families and Schools

This emphasis on the integration of school and family is the premise of the seminal work of Epstein (2001). Epstein envisions crucial spheres of influence, which overlap to affect children’s learning. These spheres are the school, the family, and the community, and they include the experience, framework, and practices of each. Epstein avers that these spheres of influence must work together to enhance student learning and development and that “the maximum overlap occurs when schools and families operate as true partners, with frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communication between parents and teachers” (p. 29). Throughout her body of work, Epstein examines multiple areas of family engagement: communication (home to school communication and school to home communication); parent volunteering; parental participation in school decision making; the parenting and home learning environment/activities; and school collaboration with the child’s community.

In each of these areas, the adults who make up the spheres of influence can be brought close together or drawn apart. Epstein contends that “at any time, in any school, and in any family, parent involvement is a variable that can be increased or decreased by the practices of teachers, administrators, parents, and students” (p. 35). This is an important consideration for the present study as we look critically at tensions that may impede the participants’ sense of connection and family engagement. Positive interactions between the adults in each sphere are crucial for forming partnerships that result in trusting familial-type relationships between home and school. Epstein avers that these positive interactions benefit the child, the school, and the family.
Likewise, Mapp’s 2003 study of family engagement found that parents who perceive a caring and trusting relationship with school personnel have an increased desire to be involved with their child’s school, and Moll (2010) avows that relations of trust and respect with families are of “profound importance” for establishing equity and encouraging engagement (p. 455). Furthermore, Shah (2009) reinforces the importance of trusting relationships in her discussion of how psychological factors influence parents’ motivation to participate in school activities. Shah upholds that the number of opportunities for parents to participate may be less important than “how the social context makes parents feel about being involved” (p. 213). These conclusions regarding family engagement and the establishment of relationships based on respect bring to the forefront the need for schools to maintain and increase positive family connections, a major aspect of the present study. In addition, it seems crucial to examine and address tensions that may be perceived by families as they interact with school personnel.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

The following section on culturally and linguistically diverse families highlights two opposing orientations held by those in the dominant society regarding people who are culturally and linguistically diverse – the deficit view of others and the strengths/abilities based view. The deficit view, when held by educators, means that students and families of a non-dominant culture are primarily viewed as lacking skills, competencies, or abilities needed for success in school. Thus, the students and families become the focus of school reform and may be given labels, such as “at-risk students,” “culturally deprived families,” or “marginal kids.” By contrast, the strengths/abilities based view assumes that people have competence, skills, and life experiences that are
positive and these strengths are at the core of their human dignity. The strengths/abilities based view of students and their families does not deny that individuals have needs that must be addressed. Rather, this framework assumes that the student and family strengths can be used to bring about practices that address academic or social needs.

Cultural Mix

It appears that the increasing cultural mix in the U.S. leads educators to sort out critical reform needs and adopt philosophical orientations that are primarily either deficit views or strengths/abilities based views of the culturally and linguistically diverse population. As researchers examine the growing population trends and school and achievement data, they are increasingly aware of the mismatch of teacher demographics and student/family background. About 90% of U.S. teachers are European American (Boyd & Brock, 2004, p. 2), yet it is predicted that by 2023, over half of all U.S. children will be of minority ethnicity. Culturally and linguistically families often experience the mismatch intensely, especially if their previous schooling experiences differ greatly from the U.S. school system. Differences in cultural assumptions and expectations can lead to what Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) call “culture shock…” among diverse parents, “…who may see the (U.S.) school as … a foreign environment – one they choose to avoid” (pp. 8-9). This avoidance or disengagement is especially true if the families perceive that the school does not respect them or, worse, views them as “deficits.”

The Deficit View

An abundance of evidence confirms that the deficit view of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families continues to prevail in many school settings and in society (Bol & Berry, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 2006, 2008; Quiocho & Daoud,
2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Yosso, 2005). This means that many educators in the U.S. hold negative perceptions and assumptions of those who are different from the dominant group. Schools are the institutions of power; therefore the philosophy adopted and promulgated by schools sends powerful messages to families. A deficit view of students and their families devalues humans (Freire, 1998/2005). Examples of school-held deficit views are found throughout the literature. For instance, teachers’ academic expectations for African Americans and Latin Americans rank low (Richardson, 2003), and even counselors in clinical practice demonstrated biased assumptions when the reported case study family name was Latin American (Gushue, Constantine, & Sciarra, 2008).

Nieto (2008) argues that the current reform movement’s dependence on high stakes testing to measure accountability has resulted in “the blaming of students and teachers for school failure,” thus reinforcing educators’ deficit view of those who are the “most vulnerable and marginalized … people of color, and those who live in poverty” (p. 4). Likewise, Yosso (2005) maintains that the deficit view is “subtle racism,” an argument she puts forth in her critique of Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory (p. 70). Bourdieu’s (1986) notion asserts that certain social class attributes result in school success and upward mobility. Yosso criticizes this theory because “it assumes that that Students of Color come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies” (p. 70). Yosso’s argument infers that Bourdieu’s theory propagates a deficit view of those who are culturally and linguistically diverse:

Bourdieu’s theoretical insight about how a hierarchical society reproduces itself has often been interpreted as a way to explain why the academic and social outcomes of People of Color are significantly lower than the outcomes of Whites. The
assumption follows that People of Color “lack” the social and cultural capital required for social mobility. As a result, schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help “disadvantaged” students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities. (p. 70) … Therefore, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor. This interpretation of Bourdieu exposes White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of “culture” are judged in comparison to this “norm.” (p. 76)

Yosso’s critical lens reminds us that negative assumptions made by those in power are a form of racism, whether subtle or not and whether intentional or not. Delpit (1995) asserts that “those with power are frequently least aware of its existence, and those with less power are most aware of its existence” (p. 26). Thus, the effect of maintaining a deficit view of students and their families is far reaching and can disrupt the opportunity for positive connections between home and school (Allen, 2007).

**Strengths/Abilities Based View**

A framework that runs counter to the deficit view is the strengths based, or abilities based viewpoint. This viewpoint looks first at the assets of those from the culturally diverse population and assumes that are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, pp. ix-x). Freire (1996) acknowledged that recognizing the strengths of others and creating respect and understanding between differing cultures is not easy:

The coexistence of different cultures in one and the same space is not something
natural and spontaneous … it must be created, worked on, in the sweat of one’s brow. It calls for a certain educational practice … it calls for new ethics, founded on respect for differences. (p. 157)

The strengths/abilities based view appeared to be an overarching assumption of a study by Mapp (2003). Recognizing a national focus on the importance of family engagement, and understanding that the school may not recognize the families’ desire to support their children’s education, Mapp wanted to examine factors that lead to successful partnerships between schools and home. Many schools, especially those serving low income and culturally and linguistically diverse students, report low levels of family engagement despite the school’s initiatives, but the school Mapp studied reported that “90% of the parents participated in one or more home-based or school-based family engagement activities“ (p. 35). Mapp’s qualitative study of 18 families included 10 culturally and linguistically diverse families from a full-inclusion urban elementary school of 220 students. The low socioeconomic setting (67% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch price) coupled with the high family engagement rate provided a unique opportunity for Mapp’s investigation (p. 37).

The selected school for Mapp’s study developed a family outreach program spearheaded by a “Family Outreach Team” consisting of parents, teachers, and the principal (Mapp, 2003, p. 39). The team organized a family center in the school’s library as “a comfortable place for families to come and feel welcome in the school, to gather for refreshments and … conversations on various social and educational topics” (p. 40). Additionally, parents were encouraged to take an active part of school governance and to meet monthly to discuss teaching and learning issues. In an effort to establish positive
home-school connections, the team visited homes of new students and homes of those who rarely made contact with the school. The team additionally held workshops for parents and helped to “create a culture at the school that was open to … all levels of family participation” (p. 40).

Through one-on-one interviews, Mapp (2003) found that (a) parents had a deep desire for their children to succeed in school; (b) parents clearly understood that their involvement helped their child’s education; (c) parents were involved with their child’s education at home, which was often not recognized by the school as engagement; (d) parents’ degree of engagement was affected by their own backgrounds; and significantly, (e) parents who felt school staff engaged in “welcoming, honoring, and connecting” with families enhanced parents’ desire to become engaged (p. 55). The parents of Mapp’s study described how positive relationships were formed between school and home:

The school community welcomed parents into the school, honored their participation, and connected with parents through a focus on the children and their learning…This welcoming, honoring, and connecting with families created a school community in which parents felt like “members of a family.” (p. 55)

Although Mapp’s (2003) research is a case study, it differs from the present study in context and demographics of the participants. There was a cultural mix among the 18 families interviewed. More importantly, the socioeconomic status of Mapp’s participants differs from the present study; in the present study, all of the families are from the middle class.

Another critical researcher, Harry (2008), presents an extensive review of literature in her discussion of collaboration with families of culturally and linguistically
diverse children who have disabilities. Harry’s purpose was to identify elements needed for collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families, to review the actual nature of collaboration, and to give recommendations for improvement. She discusses at length the difficulty of measuring culturally and linguistically diverse parental satisfaction with school collaboration. She concludes that some studies showing parental satisfaction might reflect either lower expectations or deference to the researcher. Other problems with extant research are low rate of survey return from culturally and linguistically diverse families and limited range of racial, socioeconomic, and age diversity.

Harry (2008) reports on a number of studies, including qualitative, ethnographic, and survey research (240 + and 500+ participants). Her research included those who work with Puerto Ricans, Latin Americans, African Americans, Haitians, and Asians. Harry found that even recent studies revealed that professionals frequently hold a deficit view of culturally and linguistically diverse families. Four predominant themes emerged from Harry’s literature review: “cross-cultural differences in understandings of the meaning of disability, deficit views of culturally and linguistically diverse families, cultural conflicts in the setting of transition goals, and differential understanding of caregivers’ roles in the education system” (p. 378).

Harry (2008) reports that some of the literature was positive, and many educators have strived to provide improved home-school collaboration. Family-centered practice is more accepted than ever before, especially for early intervention. However, Harry concludes with a critical stance, asserting that caregivers participating in studies
consistently have asked for “respect and support, yet attainment of these goals remains elusive for many culturally and linguistically diverse families” (p. 385).

Harry’s (2008) work confirms the need for educators who work with diverse populations to continue to strive for social justice. She found that newer literature focused on a call for “cross cultural competence … the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic diversity” (p. 383). Harry stresses the need to establish a positive, caring environment – one that “can embrace the influences of multi-dimensional identities” (p. 203). To assist in this social process, Harry asserts that schools must consider family strengths and empowerment of culturally and linguistically diverse parents, a conclusion that affirms and upholds the lifelong work of Freire (1968/2000), who believed in valuing the dignity of all humans, and Moll (2010), who, for over 30 years, has called for educators to adopt classroom practices based on the competencies of families. Harry’s assertion of the need for researchers to include wider ranges of racial, socioeconomic, and age parameters supports Lee’s (2003) argument to broaden the scope of educational research. In the next sections, we will look at literature that focuses on the Latin American population, the group to which the participants of the present study belong.

The Latin American Culture

Any discussion of group culture risks the danger of considering a group monolithically, especially a group as widely diverse as Latin Americans. Moll (2010) reminds educators to focus on how people “live culturally” rather than assign rigid “norms” to individuals (p. 455). However, the literature provides some broad general characteristics of Latin American immigrants that provide a backdrop for the present
study and also help illuminate why cross-cultural differences may occur in U.S. schools.

First, due to native language and historical background differences, Latin American immigrants are considered culturally and linguistically diverse from the dominant U.S. culture. In general, Latin Americans (as well as Native Americans, Asians, and Africans) have a cultural history of collectivism (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1996; Trumbull et al., 2003). Trumbull et al. describe collectivism as a value cluster that emphasizes relying on interdependence, listening to authority, sharing property, and considering children’s efforts as part of the group (pp. 48-49). Generally, knowledge is gained through interactions, intuition, and feelings, and warmth is a significant characteristic for collectivist cultures, which are also described as “high context” cultures (Noel, 2000, pp. 15-17). Noel provides an example of how communication styles may differ between cultures:

(In) low context cultures (such as the U.S.) … the message itself is more important than the speaker, and the message is intended to persuade or convince. In high context cultures … the meaning comes only when the context of the communication is understood since the setting, the people involved, and the emotions are all an important part of the message. (p. 15)

Noel’s observations bring deeper understanding to the cultural framework of the participants of the present study. Thus, our present examination of the context of dialogic interactions is crucial to understanding the participants’ perceptions of schools.

Greenfield et al. (1996) aver that these collectivist standards contrast with the individualistic emphasis present in U.S. schools. For example, in U.S. culture, which is considered “low context,” students who can work independently, debate, and even argue
their views with adults are highly valued (Noel, 2000, pp. 15-17). This differs from the
interdependence, respect for the knowledge of elders, and personal and complex family
relationships that are highly valued in the Latin American culture (Valdés, 1996).

Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (2005) discuss the reciprocity and “confianza”
(mutual trust) that are key elements of Latin American group practices (p. 74). Moll et al.
maintain that relationships provide a crucial context, not only for exchange among trusted
members, but also for the mediation of children’s learning. This sense of connectedness
is discussed in the following section.

Connectedness

Psychologists, social scientists, and educators have long discussed and debated what
drives human behavior. Maslow’s seminal pyramidal theory, the hierarchy of needs,
proposes that human needs must be satisfied in a particular order along a continuum of
five (Maslow, 1987; Ormrod, 2008). The theory puts forth that physiological needs, such
as food, water, oxygen, rest, etc. must be met before the second level can be addressed,
that of safety in one’s environment. The third level is the need for love and belonging,
which must be satisfied before the highest needs for esteem and self-actualization can be
fulfilled. Though often criticized for lacking empirical validity, Maslow’s theory is
popularly acknowledged (Ormrod, p. 461). Later motivation theories regarding self-worth
and relatedness show similarity to Maslow’s ideas about love and belonging (Ormrod, p.
461). Maslow contended that people seek friendly relationships that help them feel more
accepted and connected to others.

Some researchers contend that Maslow’s hierarchal need, emphasizing the desire for
belonging and connection, is even stronger in the Latin American cultures. Additionally,
compared to low context cultures, harmony within group members is of foremost importance. Children are special and significant members of the family group and expected to behave in ways that bring harmony and pride to the family system (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Valdés, 1996).

Today’s Latin American immigrants stay connected while maintaining a dual frame of reference. While maintaining affiliation with their home country and its language and cultural aspects, which are unique to each participant, and to their highly connected network of family and Latin American friends, the participants simultaneously navigate U.S. culture, including their children’s schools. Researchers are now exploring this ability to negotiate multiple frames of reference, and contemporary developmental psychologists are exploring new understandings of cognitive development in light of Latin American family interactions and strengths (Fuller & Coll, 2010). Increasingly, researchers are beginning to fully understand the critical role culture and bicultural experiences play in children’s learning (Fuller & Coll, 2010; Trueba & McLaren, 2000). Calling this a “remarkable concept shift from just a generation ago,” Fuller and Coll point out that socialization and cognitive development have previously been studied through the viewpoint of “Anglo norms” (p. 560), but new research looks at the cognitive flexibility of children reared in the highly social Latin American culture amid shifting environments in the U.S. In addition, Fuller and Coll (2010) uphold that cultural practices and norms vary in “colorfully different ways” among different subgroups within the Latin American communities and countries (p. 560), an understanding that should be noted by researchers and educators. The authors emphasize the importance of exploring how individual immigrant families are viewing, adapting, or buffering new environments.
New immigrant parents are in transition, meshing home cultural routines with school expectations and “adapting parenting practices according to how benign or threatening” they perceive the environment (p. 560). The present study extends Fuller and Coll’s exploration by examining the perspectives of first generation Latin American immigrants as they interact with their children’s schools.

La Educación, A Educação

A final note about Latin American commonalities is the concept of la educación (in Spanish), or a educação (in Portuguese). This word, translated from the English word, education, encompasses a larger meaning than its U.S. counterpart. The Latin American notion of education is nuanced to include not only school academics, but also the moral education provided by the family (Auerbach, 2002; Freire, 1996). Thus, as we consider the Latin American assumption that families are an integral part of what is considered a child’s whole education, the concept provides a frame of reference for the perspectives of this study’s participants. Additionally, and importantly, with this Latin American framework, the curriculum is considered a given, and the school is generally considered the authority (Noel, 2000) on academic matters. This perspective will color how the findings of the present study are considered. If the family believes that school is the academic authority and the family is the moral authority, their understanding of family engagement with the school may differ. Although Reyna (2008) studied U.S. born Latin Americans, her research conclusions parallel the focus of the present study. Reyna concludes:

The confusion about what constitutes parent involvement by U.S.-born Latino parents also stems from a perceived failure on the part of school personnel to
recognize the cultural capital and richness of the culturally diverse household. The perceived misunderstanding about the assets of such households, coupled with a failure to critically reflect about the intricate differences of culture and race of their students, limits the teacher’s ability to effectively teach students of color and renders them trapped in engaging practices that automatically default to a deficit mode of thinking about students and families of color. (p. 147)

It is thus critical to develop strengths-based partnerships based on respect that incorporate the overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001) so that “both groups (families and schools) can be active participants in the education of children” (Orozco, 2008, p. 22).

Moll’s Funds of Knowledge

Moll and his colleagues are renowned for research that explores the rich background of students from non-dominant cultures, a concept that has become known as funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), and one that intersects well with the conceptual framework for the present study. Funds of knowledge is defined as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 72). The concept holds that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., pp. ix-x). Educators utilizing a funds of knowledge approach view families and communities in terms of their resources rather than their deficits and find ways to incorporate these resources into classroom instruction. The concept holds that both the non-dominant and the dominant groups gain when funds of knowledge are shared.
This expanded notion of family engagement reaches into the child’s community and family to tap into the experiences that envelop the whole child by making connections with families. The literature refers to funds of knowledge commonly, referring to it interchangeably as a concept, theory, strategy, lens, or approach (Moll et al., 2005; Oughton, 2010). Moll himself credits the term to anthropologists Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg, who also studied Latin American households (Oughton, 2010), and his works use the term generically. It appears that when funds of knowledge is used regarding an idea, the colleagues refer to it as a concept. When they describe a specific teaching strategy being used, Moll’s colleagues used the term approach. For the purposes of this paper, the term funds of knowledge will be used in the same manner as it appears in Moll’s works.

Using qualitative methods to research Latin American families living in Tucson, Arizona in the 1990s, Gonzalez et al. (2005) used observations, open-ended interviews, life histories, and case studies to uncover the cultural and intellectual resources of the families they studied. What they found was a multitude of assets that helped families thrive but were untapped and mostly unacknowledged by the local schools. These resources included agriculture and mining; material and scientific knowledge; economics; medicine; household management; and religion. The researchers further found that the culturally and linguistically diverse children’s knowledge acquisition contrasted with typical U.S. classroom practice. For example, knowledge was transmitted to children through social networks they called “thick” (p. 74), i.e. multiple interconnections of family and neighbors, such as uncles, aunts, father’s friends, etc. These relationships were built on mutual enduring trust, and the teaching, learning, and interest were within
the context of the activities. The child was an active participant, and in many cases, the child’s participation was essential for the family’s functioning. The researchers found many instances of children contributing economically, communicating for parents with outside institutions, repairing appliances and automobiles, caring for siblings, and helping with household maintenance.

Transforming Funds of Knowledge Into Classroom Practice and Pedagogy

Moll’s work does not stop with ethnography alone. He, his colleagues, and other followers have explored how to transform the funds of knowledge into classroom practice. Followers of the funds of knowledge approach maintain that the resources and skills children bring to school can be the rich raw material for instruction. Culturally and linguistically diverse families, including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc., and community members can help plan lessons and instruct. For students and families, supporting their knowledge and skills and integrating families into school activities can possibly mean the difference between equity and disenfranchisement. In contrast to the traditional culturally responsive teaching that relies on “folkloric displays such as storytelling, arts, and crafts,” Moll et al. (2005, p. 85) provide examples of how teachers can reach deeper into particular households and incorporate the families’ skills and functioning into lesson planning. As Trueba and McLaren (2000, p. 60) point out, this type of teaching is based on sociocultural constructivist principles as it utilizes immigrant children’s cultural background as the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978) in the mediation of new learning. Trueba and McLaren call this kind of teaching “a pedagogy of hope” (p. 59):
A pedagogy of hope based on Vygotskian principles … establishes the relationship among culture, language, and cognition as the foundation to understand the role of culture in mediating the transmission of knowledge and intellectual growth. … (This) must translate instruction into pedagogical practices that permit immigrant children to engage in their own development, to invest their own cultural and linguistic capital, and to advance without prejudice. (p. 59)

This approach requires at least some knowledge about a family and the establishment of a connection between home and school, reflecting the first research question of the present study. For instance, a teacher-researcher working with Moll’s colleagues witnessed one student’s entrepreneurial skills during a home visit. The child’s adeptness in selling Mexican candy from his home to neighbors became the genesis for a teaching module that involved math, language arts, advertising, social studies, and economics. Students organized parent interview questions and developed ingredient lists, and the student’s parent came to the school to teach the students how to make the candy. The students measured, prepared, and marketed the product while the parent fielded questions about numerous aspects of her country. The teacher maintained that from this one lesson, the students could have continued an investigation using their critical thinking skills for many more months.

**A Critical Look at Funds of Knowledge**

The concept of funds of knowledge is not without its critics. Teachers must be reflective about their own assumptions and also open to learning new skills and sensitivities needed for exploring families’ strengths, competencies, and skills (Freire, 1998/2005; Gonzalez et al., 2005). Gonzalez et al. express a concern about possible
stereotyping; merely knowing that members of certain cultures generally practice particular norms could lead to stereotypic thinking. Teachers who already hold biased beliefs about non-dominant cultures may have their prejudices reinforced when they learn about common patterns and discourses of those cultures. Even teachers who maintain their open-mindedness may have knowledge of multicultural information but are unable to connect the information to practice. In addition to gaining knowledge about culturally and linguistically diverse families, teachers must know how to follow a constructivist approach, explore and connect with families, their communities, and the knowledge and lived experiences held within. Then, they must be able to translate this knowledge into strategies and activities that engage both parents and children.

An additional caution is raised by the use of the metaphor *funds*, which could influence educators to think of knowledge as something static that a person owns rather than something that involves participation (Oughton, 2010). Freire was well known for his criticism of an educational system that treats knowledge as capital or a fund to be withdrawn and possessed, as if schools were banks (Freire, 1998/2005; Nieto, 2008). The original phrase, funds of knowledge, was derived from the anthropologic study of household funds, i.e. funds for rent, funds for groceries, that is, caches that families owned. Oughton justifies critical consideration of the concept because learning involves performing new tasks and interacting actively, not merely possessing intellectual property. This same criticism could be applied to Bourdieu’s (1986) use of the term *cultural capital*, a phrase sometimes seen as similar to funds of knowledge and used in its place because it also describes the physical, social, and mental resources, including life experiences, held by individuals within a certain culture. Bourdieu’s notion, however, is
used to explain why members of certain social classes are able to succeed in school and in the dominant society. Oughton further queries about who determines which knowledge is of value to be taught. Although this type of teaching does not negate or diminish state standards, teachers are often afraid to explore additive strategies or add their own new ideas to an existing curriculum (knowledge), especially in an age of rigid accountability brought on by legal mandates (Nieto, 2008).

The work of Moll and his colleagues (Gonzalez et al., 2005) did not differentiate the educational or socioeconomic levels of the families in their studies. However, their philosophy of respect is one that promotes dialogic interactions and connecting schools with families from the non-dominant culture, the basis for the present study. For this reason, as the results of the present study are examined, I consider how the participants perceive that their child’s school respects and honors the families’ funds of knowledge.

The Bridging Cultures Project

Corroborating Moll’s (2010) strengths/abilities based assertion that valuing families begins with investigating the ways parents can be connected to schools, Trumbull et al. (2003) conducted a longitudinal research project in six schools, The Bridging Cultures Project, which showed a positive impact on teacher/parent relationships and increased family engagement in schools. The project began with the premise that educators must be open to “hearing how parents want to participate” (p. 68). During the project, teachers learned how to (a) establish more personal relationships with Latin American families, (b) understand and value differences in cultures, (c) conduct ethnography, (d) explain school culture to parents, and (e) explore new roles for both parents and teachers (pp. 54-64).
The participants of the Trumbull et al. (2003) study were families who immigrated to California from Mexico and Central America. Although the authors did not designate the educational or socioeconomic level of all of the parents, they did indicate that two of the schools were in non-affluent areas with large Latin American populations. By following one of the teachers longitudinally, they found that five of the parents in one class were unable to read, which limited the at-home academic support. Because these parents were unavailable to volunteer during school hours due to their employment, the teacher developed an “ethnography chart” (p. 61) to investigate how the parents could become engaged. She explained the chart to parents during the fall orientation meeting. Then, small individual notes in Spanish were sent home during the year; as her chart expanded, the teacher was able to target ways to involve each family.

The Bridging Cultures Project informs the present study in several ways. Through a long-term project that connected schools with Latin American families, teachers in the study adopted new frameworks for understanding culture and how to conduct “ethnographic inquiry” (p. 45). The families were able to share their personal and cultural values with the teachers, which in turn led to new classroom practices and increased connections between home and school. The major focus of the project appeared to be new learning for teachers, and the results were presented through the teachers’ viewpoints rather than through the perspective of the families, as is done in the present study. The teachers related their new respect for the families as a result of the project, as exemplified by these comments: “I relate much better now because I don’t come to them like they are ignorant. (I’m not) patronizing” and “…with a better awareness of culture – of value beliefs, I can get rid of judgments and make more constructive choices in the
classroom” (p. 56). This revelation implies that the teachers who commented recognized their initially held stereotypes and (likely) deficit view of the families and were now moving toward a strengths/abilities based viewpoint. Trumbull et al. (2003) affirmed this new understanding as a result of the study: “The first apparent change in each teacher’s ability to take the perspective of parents was reflected in (these comments)” (p. 56).

Tensions That Impede Family Engagement

The next two sections address literature related to the second major research question, which is: What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America? We begin with literature related to tensions inherent in interactions between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Following this section, literature related to tensions inherent in the interactions between schools and Latin American families, in particular, will be discussed.

The present examination uses a critical lens. Trueba and McLaren (2000) assert that critical research is “risky and painful” but it is a “commitment to praxis” (p. 59). Any critical study of home and school interactions must explore if and how families perceive tensions, stereotyping, or negative discourse within the interactions. Further, it is important to examine if and how any of these interactions impede families’ sense of connectedness with schools and their willingness to engage within the school environment.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families: Identifying the Tensions

Turney and Kao

Tensions can become barriers that sideline a family’s sense of connection with the school and possibly impede family engagement even if those tensions are subtle and
unintentional. In an effort to systematically examine barriers to family engagement with schools, Turney and Kao (2009) conducted a large study of 1,000 schools. The researchers used parent survey data to compare race and immigrant/native-born differences among parents of kindergarteners. The authors note that their study extends literature on parental involvement because of its focus on parents of younger children rather than parents with older children. Among the many aspects of their analyses, Turney and Kao found that immigrant parents, especially those who have not mastered English, perceive that they face significant barriers to school engagement. The research reported chief barriers for this group to be “(a) meeting times were inconvenient, (b) the school did not make them feel welcome, and (c) meetings were conducted only in English” (p. 264).

Of note is Turney and Kao’s (2009) methodology. Survey research was used rather than exploration of narratives in which parents might have generated their own list of barriers to engagement. On the first round of surveys, all parents were asked if they attended meetings, such as those for PTA, participated in advisory groups, attended parent-teacher conferences, volunteered at the school, or participated in school fundraising. During the next survey round, the parents were presented a list of barriers, such as inconvenient meeting times, no child care, problems with safety, not feeling welcomed by the school, meetings conducted in English only, conflict with work schedules, etc. The parents were asked by survey if they had experienced these barriers, and the researchers then coded each barrier as either “faces barrier” or “does not face barrier” (p. 260). The authors concluded that their results delineating considerable
barriers to involvement were “sobering” given the import of parental engagement as associated with academic success (p. 269).

Relevant to the present study of middle class Latin Americans, Turney and Kao (2009) further controlled their statistical analysis for socioeconomic variables, and the findings persisted in showing immigrant parents less likely than native-born parents to engage in school activities. The researchers analyzed their data using several different models, comparing race, foreign-born/native-born status, length of time in U.S., and ability to speak English. Turney and Kao found the benefit of the ability to speak English was a weaker moderating variable on parental school involvement for Latin Americans and Asians than for white immigrants. The authors propose that as white immigrants “develop greater English fluency, they become more comfortable in interacting with teachers,” and that “minority status may trump English language ability” (p. 271).

Turney and Kao (2009) comment that their survey research may not have captured the extent of barriers to engagement that immigrants face. Because it was survey research rather than case study, it was not possible for the researchers to delve deeply into participants’ rich descriptions of their interactions with schools and the barriers they face. Additionally, by presenting a list of activities considered to be family engagement, the survey did not afford parents an opportunity to describe other ways they may be supporting their child’s education. For this reason, qualitative research that allows participants to voice their own tensions, such as the present study, would enrich Turney and Kao’s substantial study.
As part of an evaluation of a liaison program in an urban school district, Howland, Anderson, Smiley, and Abbott (2006) reviewed literature relevant to their program and then conducted focus groups with 19 culturally and linguistically diverse parents. The focus groups revealed that tensions inherent in interactions between school and home were effectively mediated by the liaison program. The study is relevant to the present investigation because (a) the authors review research pertinent to school interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and (b) the participants discussed dialogical tensions that were eventually ameliorated by the school liaisons. The focus groups consisted of a cultural mix of 15 women and four men.

The authors concluded from their literature review that, despite the positive correlation between family engagement and academic achievement, “teachers may not see school-home collaboration as a legitimate educational function” and do not make significant efforts to build relationships with families (p. 48). They report that teachers view themselves as less competent in making positive home-school connections than do nurses and social workers, and professional development and teacher training programs provide few experiences for teachers to learn skills for effective communication with parents (p. 48). Howland et al. (2006) suggest that poor school-home connections present a major barrier to family engagement with the school.

Other tensions that impede family engagement listed by Howland et al. (2006) are: time constraints for both families and schools; parent and teacher uncertainty about their roles; cultural barriers; and “actual or perceived uninviting school environments” (p. 49). Additionally, formal discourse and technical language by school personnel,
hierarchal relationships, and one-way communication all appear to interfere with authentic dialogue that builds connections between schools and families (Freire, 1998/2005; Howland et al.). Howland et al. aver that even school-sponsored parent education programs can harm positive connections between home and school, as it is often implied that the parents have deficit skills and need to be taught.

Howland et al. (2006) report that urban schools face additional challenges to family engagement, such as higher poverty rates, more students who do not speak English, and populations that are perceived as marginalized by the “dominant group that sets cultural standards in U.S. public schools,” which continues to be white and middle class “even in areas heavily populated by people from diverse backgrounds” (p. 50). Embedded in the focus group results were the revelations of tensions that existed between home and school. The parents indicated satisfaction with the liaison program and explained how the specific liaisons helped them resolve conflicts that had previously impeded positive connections and family engagement with the school. An example is provided here:

We’re parents, this is new to us; there was a lot of things we didn’t understand because our parents, they wasn’t (sic) involved in school … she (the liaison) helped us and we made our mind up we were going to be involved. (p. 57)

This excerpt infers that the parents’ inexperience with family engagement, their lack of information, and the uncertainty of their roles had impeded family engagement with the school. The liaison acted as intermediary to help provide access to family engagement for these parents. It appears the family now felt less marginalized, as suggested by the new
determination to “be involved.” Through respect and dialogue, equity was gained (Freire, 1998/2005).

Another excerpt reveals tensions in the interactions between teachers and the participant:

Some of them, I don’t know why they’re teachers. … They don’t take time out to even call and talk to you. … I know we all are human, we all different people, but when you get a job (teaching) … you need to be on the same level, especially when they’re dealing with somebody’s child … communication makes everything better. (p. 58)

This excerpt infers not only a desire for increased connection with the teachers, but also respect and equity. It suggests that this parent is aware that the onus for communication lies with the school, and it is the teacher’s job to extend the invitation to connect with parents. Positive connections between teachers and families must be built on respect, and the initiation for dialogue should begin with those who have more power, in this case, the teachers (Freire, 1998/2005).

Other tensions revealed in the focus groups included lack of information about opportunities for family engagement, as suggested by this comment: “There are some things the school offers, but I never knew anything about it and my children were there for the past three years” (Howland et al., 2006, p. 62). It appears this parent has been marginalized for three years. The remainder of the excerpt reveals how the liaison helped the parent enroll in a school activity. Closer connection with school personnel and increased dialogue would likely have provided information leading to family engagement years earlier than it occurred for this parent.
Tensions That Impede Family Engagement for Latin Americans

The following section presents a review of studies that reveal tensions inherent in interactions that are specifically between Latin American families and their children’s schools. As a particular subset of culturally and linguistically diverse populations, Latin Americans represent a unique focus of study due to their historical backgrounds, their increasing presence in U.S. schools, and the documented, often-negative assumptions about Latin Americans held by those in positions of power (Trueba & McLaren, 2000).

Dispelling Myths: Parents Have Their Say

Unlike Turney and Kao’s (2009) extensive research, which examined and compared parents of kindergartners of all races and ethnicities, the focus of Quiocho and Daoud’s (2006) *Dispelling Myths about Latino Parent Participation in Schools*, was specifically the Latin American population. Their study examined teachers’ perceptions of Latin American parent involvement and as a corollary, also investigated the perceptions of the Latin American parents in relation to the schools. Quiocho and Daoud began with a meta-analysis, which consistently reported the parents’ high hopes for their children’s lives coupled with the teachers’ misinterpretation of the parents’ school involvement. They found in a 28-year study in seven states that Latin American parents wanted to collaborate with schools to facilitate their children’s success (p. 256). Quiocho and Daoud reported other studies that indicated U.S. teachers and administrators commonly held a deficit view by perceiving Latin American parents as not valuing their children’s education and not wanting to assimilate into U.S. society. The authors concluded, based on this and other research, the perception may have been due to a larger societal negative perception of immigrants in general.
Quiocho and Daoud (2006) thus desired to explore in depth the divergent perspectives of school staff and parents in two schools with diverse populations in southern California. Both schools were described as underperforming by the state, and all but one of the English Language Learners at the schools spoke Spanish as their native language. Their qualitative study began with observations and interviews with teachers, administrators, and school staff members (custodians, aides, and secretaries) at both schools. The majority of school interviews were with teachers, and all observations were in classes with English Language Learners.

Initially, the Latin American parents who were interviewed were those who had volunteered for the school advisory board and were volunteers in their children’s classrooms. To include a larger number of parents, the investigators held public meetings, inviting parents to come share their perspectives and concerns. At one school, about 30 were expected to attend, yet 250 parents arrived. A limitation of the report, not mentioned by the authors, was that displayed parent data was not differentiated to show which responses were from the advisory board and which were from the public forum. However, the results of the study were consistent with the hypothesis first presented by the investigators.

Themes emerging from the teacher interviews were the belief that Latin American parents were unreliable, would not volunteer, did not support the homework policy, and did not care about education as much as other parents. The teachers also perceived Latin American parents as unskilled and unprofessional. In other words, the teachers held a deficit view of Latin American families.
The parents’ themes expressed the desire for help for their children and themselves, improved home-school communication/partnership, and access to a more rigorous curriculum. The parents said they would like teachers to respond when children ask for assistance, and they wanted the teachers to be friendlier, to respect their children, and to keep promises. Asking why their children were not in science and social studies classes, the parents said, for example, “I want the singing and the drawing to stop” (p. 263). They were clear they wanted their children to be held to the same standards as others, but they also wanted their children to receive academic help when needed and for the schools to be held accountable. The Latin American parents wanted to be respected partners with the school and asked if books written in Spanish could be available so they could assist their children with assignments. The parents said that it was true some families allow children to watch too much television instead of focusing on homework but said this was also true for some non-Latin American families as well. The study found that the Latin American parents would like to be connected to schools and support the schools’ efforts to provide academic progress for their children. To facilitate dialogue between home and school, the parents would like a liaison at each school who can communicate to parents who are not yet English-fluent, perhaps even an employee at the front office who can speak Spanish.

Quiocho and Daoud (2006) point out that the surprising level of attendance at the public forum, the articulation of views expressed by the parents, and the dedication of the Latin American advisory board volunteers were some ways that helped reduce negative feelings of both parents and staff at the end of this study. Other suggestions to facilitate
connectedness between home and school were alternating locations of meetings, finding ways to communicate regularly, and listening with respect to parents’ concerns.

Quirocho and Daoud’s (2006) study confirmed that Latin American parents care about their children’s education and want a rigorous curriculum. It also highlighted erroneous assumptions made by school staff regarding the study’s participants. Although the schools were described as underperforming, the methodology section did not designate the socioeconomic or educational range of the parents investigated. Therefore, the percentage of parents with middle class backgrounds included in Quirocho and Daoud’s study is unknown. Additionally, unlike the present in-depth case study, which is delimited to four families, Quirocho and Daoud collected data from 250 Latin American parents at a school forum. However, the results indicated that the parents wanted to be connected to the school and longed to be heard and respected by the school. The dialogue that occurred at the public forum resulted in new insights for the U.S. teachers and staff. Thus, the research of Quirocho and Daoud is edifying for the present study.

Tensions Turn to Parental Anger: Differences in Viewpoints

Like Quirocho and Daoud (2006), Reyna (2008) examined the perspectives of Latin American parents regarding family engagement with their children’s schools. Reyna found a mismatch between the participants’ perceptions regarding their role in their children’s education and their perceptions of what school personnel expected and measured as family engagement. Additionally, guided by the funds of knowledge conceptual framework, she found that the U.S. born Latin American families she studied “have assets that contribute to the academic success of their children, yet they are often dismissed by school personnel” (p. iv). It should be noted that Reyna’s study participants
were English speakers who had attended the U.S. school system themselves as second and third generations Latin Americans, and their children were excelling in school.

Reyna’s (2008) study uncovers much more than a difference between parents’ and schools’ expectations for family engagement. Reyna’s findings reveal deep parental anger stemming from what they perceived as the school’s deficit view, shown through disdain and disregard for the families. Reyna recounts: “The parents seemed to be locked into a constant struggle with the school personnel, having to negotiate the parent/school relationship on a daily basis” (p. 96). Reyna avers that schools typically perceive successful family engagement as parental attendance at programs, PTA meetings, and volunteer opportunities at the school. She reveals that the participants of her study perceived that these same in-school activities are highly valued and are politically rewarded by the teachers and administrators at their children’s schools (p. 100). The political rewards were seen as favored status in terms of verbal and nonverbal accolades as well as special class placement for the children of parents who make their presence known at the school. This depiction reveals the perceived imbalance of power at the school and the unfairness of the favored status of certain parents, as seen through the eyes of the participants. The parents suggest they are marginalized by their very circumstances, a form of subtle oppression (Freire, 1968/2000).

On the other hand, the study participants, unable to be present for many in-school activities in this high poverty urban school district due to work schedules and family obligations, viewed themselves as extremely supportive of their children’s educational success. They saw their own parental roles as nurturers and motivators ("dream builders") and advocates ("dream makers") for their children (p. 81). The participants
suggested that the school personnel failed to recognize these important parental roles, and in fact, showed antagonism toward the parents when they tried to advocate for their children at school. Further, Reyna suggests the participants felt the teachers looked at the families with a deficit view and took the credit when the children succeeded. Reyna describes how the parents viewed their advocacy role, especially in light of the perceived deficit view the parents believed prevailed at the school:

The parents articulated, in an almost activist voice, a strong sense of needing to shield their children from the kind of suffering they experienced as children in the public school system. … Drawing from their own negative childhood experiences, the parents seem compelled to protect their children from those persons at the school who have low expectations of their children. They seemed to believe that school personnel have low expectations of their children’s academic performance and social development because they believe that teachers negatively judge them because of where they live or because they have fewer resources than others. Further, it seems that the lack of presence of or support from their own parents during their schooling process motivated them to be overtly involved in an advocacy role to keep their children’s hopes and dreams alive. (p. 92)

According to Reyna’s findings, the participants perceived that school personnel not only dismissed the importance of their parental support (their funds of knowledge), they felt the schools demeaned their dignity and mistreated their children. Reyna describes numerous incidents portrayed by the parents that reveal their negative perceptions of school events. For example, Reyna tells of a participant’s reaction to the school’s response when her son was injured on the playground: “Those teachers don’t care about
him. They will treat him badly because they don’t like me or maybe because they think we are nobodies” (p. 94). The findings suggest that other participants also perceived the school did not attend to their children’s needs and made negative and hurtful statements to both participants and their children regarding the family circumstances. Reyna’s descriptions of the participants’ perceptions are stinging examples of parents who feel the schools denigrate their very being. In the eyes of these parents, the show of respect and human dignity called for by Freire (1996) does not exist.

When asked about family engagement in activities at school, the parents continued to recount negative feelings, Reyna describes below:

Each parent took a few minutes to recall …a school sanctioned activity. Most of the parents referenced their involvement with the organized Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or a planned activity such as Open House or an awards assembly. Their recollections … were negative … and most told of a confrontational situation which left them feeling dismissive of the usefulness of participating in organization such as PTA. … They perceived the organization as self-serving, undirected and, most important, a waste of their time—a precious commodity. … (One parent stated) that she no longer cared to be involved with them (PTA) because she felt that the members really did not care about her opinion; (her husband) echoed the same sentiments. Specifically, she said she attended a PTA meeting to offer her suggestions about how the organization could better spend monies raised through fundraising activities. … She said, instead of taking (her) suggestions into consideration … “They told me that I didn’t understand and that they were going to keep on doing what they do because that’s the way it has always been done.”… She
concluded then that her role in the PTA was over mostly because she did not conform to the expectations set by other parents, whom she believed were influenced by school staff. (pp. 96-97)

Reyna’s (2008) study provides a scathing portrait of interactions between schools as institutions of power and families who feel marginalized (Freire, 1998/2005). The participants perceived they were disrespected as parents and that their funds of knowledge were not valued by the school. Their perceptions of being marginalized were their reality, and as they related to Reyna, their inclination to become engaged in school sponsored activities was impeded. Importantly, they still perceived themselves as highly engaged in their children’s education as motivators and advocates, suggesting they care deeply about their children’s academic success even if they perceive the school does not honor this type of family engagement.

Reyna’s (2008) qualitative methodology and conceptual framework are similar to those of the present study. Reyna’s study differs from this study in context (high poverty urban school district compared to suburban school district) and in the participants’ educational and socioeconomic levels. Further, Reyna disclosed that some participants of her study had previous negative experiences in their own schooling, whereas all participants of the present study reported a positive history of school. This represents a significant difference in the participants’ frameworks as they view their children’s schools.

Parental Tensions Expressed: A Narrative Analysis

Auerbach’s (2002) narrative analysis of Latin American parents emerged from a previous ethnographic project during which she noted the “emotional force within and
connections among parents’ accounts” as they discussed tensions, frustrations, and alienation resulting from interactions their children’s schools (p. 1373). Maintaining that the individual voices of parents of color have been relatively neglected in educational research, Auerbach’s original project provided an opportunity for parents of high school students in an experimental college access program to express their agency and “oppositional voice” through storytelling (p. 1369). Auerbach then analyzed the individual stories of four of the project’s participants - four working class Latin American parents. Three of the parents were originally from Mexico and the fourth was a U.S. born child of Mexican immigrant parents. While Auerbach’s narrative study did not include any parents who had advanced beyond community college, her use of narrated stories to explore participants’ perspectives of their children’s schools parallels the present study.

Auerbach’s review of literature found that parents with “low educational attainment experience inferiority, shame, embarrassment, and helplessness” in regards to interactions with their child’s school (p. 1373). Auerbach avers that the mismatch between school and home cultures is especially prevalent with Latin American families who have less education than the participants of the present study. She argues:

Parents of color come from rich storytelling traditions that are rarely acknowledged or tapped as a resource in school settings. … The marginalized social location of parents of color at schools complicates their … opportunities to be heard. … Traditionally, school folk have dominated the discourse in encounters with parents. School events, such as Back to School Night, are typically orchestrated by staff for the containment of conflict and the assertion of
the school’s authority. … Not surprisingly, many parents fear reprisals for voicing critique and silence themselves. (p. 1372)

Auerbach’s quote reveals the participants’ funds of knowledge, in this case, storytelling skills, that are neglected by institution of power, the school. We are reminded by this narrative that Freire (1968/2000) urged the oppressed to name and confront acts that are oppressive.

As Auerbach (2002) analyzed the Latin American parents’ narratives, her findings fell into three genres: cautionary tale, story of rebuff, and counterstory (p. 1375). In “cautionary tales,” parents told life stories related to disappointments from their own schooling and the desire to “push” their own children to succeed in school (Auerbach, 2002, p. 1376). Auerbach suggests that parents who related disappointments in their own school experiences and who were reared with less than middle class status may need more support and information from the school to be engaged and help their children achieve success. The desire to prevent their own children from repeating the parents’ educational mistakes often results in tensions in relation to family engagement with the school. One parent expressed her insecurity about the “right way” for her to interact educationally: “I don’t know how far I can go… when to push and when to pull back” (p. 1377). Auerbach asserts that, “Working class minority parents draw on multiple cultural repertoires to make sense of schooling, including ostensibly middle class messages on parenting styles and academic monitoring” (p. 1378). This comment reveals a significant difference between the participants of Auerbach’s study and those of the present study; the families of the current study have more experience with schooling and their own academic success.
Auerbach (2002) found that one of the most consistent tensions expressed by parents was “dissatisfaction in dealings with school staff” (p. 1379). These “stories of rebuff” related parents’ experiences of rejections, barriers, or instances of alienation resulting from incidences at their children’s school (p. 1379). The tensions ranged from a counselor’s assumption that a child could not succeed in a higher-level class to abruptness on the part of school staff. One parent described the “runaround she got when she asked a counselor for a scholarship packet” (p. 1379). Another parent complained that the same counselor did not “pay close attention” (p. 1379):

I was very upset … I tried to get ahold (sic) of the counselor a few times … and he never got back with me. I went to one of the meetings, the parent Open House … and I met him … “I don’t remember (the details) and he made me feel that Marianna (her daughter) was not smart enough. (p. 1380)

This parent was clearly asking for dialogue but was thwarted when the counselor did not return her request. When the parent finally met the counselor, she perceived that he did not respect her daughter, and therefore did not respect her as a parent. The interaction that offended the daughter appeared to be equally or more offensive for the mother as she absorbed and experienced the daughter’s rebuff. The literature describes the intense bonds between parent and child and the typically special place of children in Latin American families (Noel, 2000; Orozco, 2008; Valdés, 1996). Auerbach avers that parents who have undergone this sense of exclusion have a great need to tell their stories, not only for emotional release but also for a chance to sort out the meaning of their upsetting experience and the nature of the barriers they encounter (p. 1381).
By providing a safe place for the parent to retell the story, Auerbach offered the opportunity for the parent to finally have a dialogue about the incident, which appeared to bring meaning as well as a degree of liberation for her (Freire, 1968/2000).

The final theme, “counterstory,” describes what happened when participants from a non-dominant culture spoke out against injustices that were occurring at the school (Auerbach, 2002, p. 1382). Auerbach notes that spokespersons with skills to speak for other marginalized parents “are critical to helping educators reach out to parents who are traditionally less visible” (p. 1383) and “unmask” policies that alienate those unwilling or unable to oppose authority (p. 1384). Auerbach argues that in addition to providing agency for the participants, counterstories provide the opportunity for schools to address issues directly, i.e. “to put them front and center so that parents feel free to talk about them” (p. 1386). Freire (1968/2000) maintained that dialogue is not always easy; difficult issues must be discussed in order to achieve liberation for those who are oppressed.

Auerbach’s (2002) research coalesces with the conceptual framework of the present examination in that her study suggests that respect and dialogue are important factors in home-school relations. By reporting the tales of frustrations and exclusion experienced by families from the non-dominant culture as they interacted with their children’s schools, Auerbach offers the opportunity for educators to hear the perspectives of families who are oppressed and to begin a dialogue (Freire, 1996). While the current study did not bring the participants together in the same location as did Auerbach, and although she described her participants as working class, her arguments for exploring the stories narrated by Latin American families are cogent and relevant to the present investigation of middle class Latin American immigrants. Further, her findings that
suggest Latin American parents hold education in high regard are consistent with the larger body of literature on this topic.

Structural Constraints and Motivational Tensions As Impeding Factors

As part of a study to examine the effect of the presence of Latin Americans in school positions of power on family engagement, Shah (2009) examined survey data from 324 Latin American parents. Shah’s analysis is relevant to the present study because she delineates specific factors that are associated with low Latin American family engagement with their children’s schools. She describes these factors as “structural constraints” and “motivational barriers” (p. 213). Shah then tests and confirms the hypothesis that the psychological factors that impede family engagement of Latin American parents can be “transformed” with the intentional hiring of Latin American representatives in key school positions (p. 214). Shah’s operational definitions and subsequent discussion provide insight for educators as we examine factors that impede family engagement of Latin American parents with their children’s schools.

Structural Constraints

Shah (2009) describes structural constraints that affect family engagement as factors over which the school has no control. These include factors such as race, socioeconomic and educational levels, work demand, large family size, number of children under 18, home ownership, and English speaking ability. Shah avers that, for example, while parents may want to participate at school, their life circumstances may impede their ability to do so. Inflexible work schedules and inadequate daycare are major obstacles. She maintains that, although race and socioeconomic factors are “main
predictors of participation,” analysis of these “intractable variables is unsatisfactory … and outside the scope of policy efforts” (p. 215).

Motivational Barriers

Shah (2009) bases her study on theory that holds that participation is “internally driven by particular belief systems,” specifically “role construction, efficacy, and perceptions of invitations to participate” (p. 215). Role construction means how the parents view their own role within the home-school relationship. As seen in the literature, school personnel and Latin American families often have different expectations for family engagement with schools (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Reyna, 2008; Valdés, 1996). Shah (2009) suggests that, as Latin Americans view their parental role as physical and moral support at home, their psychological framework may present a motivational barrier to attendance at open houses or academic exhibitions. Their reluctance may be interpreted by the school as parental indifference. Shah asserts, “Thus, the challenge for school districts is how to move Latino parental role constructions closer to their own” (p. 216). Shah’s assertion brings to mind Freire’s (1996) notion of respect for the differences of others as well as the need for dialogue between those in power and those who are not in order to find common ground.

Shah (2009) maintains that a parent’s low sense of self-efficacy can present another motivational barrier to family engagement: “Parents who believe their actions will be useless will not participate” (p. 217). The literature supports that when families feel marginalized by school decision makers, frustrations ensue, and fragile connections between home and school are threatened (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Reyna, 2008). Shah
suggests that Latin American representation in school positions of power will positively affect the motivation for family engagement:

(Latin American representation) sends important cues to Latino parents and changes how they envision their role within their child’s education and their place within the school. … Latino administrators and school board members … by their appearance alone or by symbolic gestures, send heuristic cues to the Latino parents that they now have some political power. … (the parents) will have a greater sense of self-efficacy … and this will in turn lead to more participation within schools. (p. 217)

The call for empowerment of those from the non-dominant population in this excerpt is supported by Freirean thought (1968/2000). Shah calls for equity and liberation by encouraging Latin Americans to imagine themselves with more powerful roles within U.S. schools.

Finally, Shah (2009) discusses “unwelcoming” schools as a motivational barrier (p. 218). She maintains that Latin American parents often perceive schools as discouraging and unwelcoming. She summarizes literature on this topic and posits:

In general, people are more likely to participate if asked to … (but) perceptions of invitations … relate to how parents feel about the school environment and the persons making the invitations. … Invitations from school administrators … (may be) seen not as opportunities to interact … but rather as criticisms of their parenting (that) highlight their ignorance. (p. 218)

Again, Shah avers that Latin American representation in school positions of power makes a difference in family engagement by Latin American parents. Her analysis of data found
“significant changes in parental role constructions, self-efficacy, and perceptions of invitations to participate, which manifest in increased parental involvement” (p. 225). Shah’s study informs the present examination by suggesting specific factors that may encourage or impede family engagement. Additionally, her discussion of how cultural and psychological frameworks affect parents’ inclination to engage with schools provides cogent implications for educational practice. While Shah’s study does not provide rich, qualitative descriptions, her analysis of the survey data and recommendations provide a significant addition to the literature on the perspectives of Latin American parents.

Critical Theory: Historical Background

As the present study explores the context, perceptions, and understandings of school-home connections and family engagement among four middle class immigrant families from Latin America who have children in U.S. public schools, a critical lens is used. Researchers and scholars who adopt a critical perspective explore the power differentials embedded in society. Critical theory argues that dominant groups, that is, those who hold positions of influence, have the power to marginalize or alienate non-dominant members of society. While the roots of such thought can be traced back to Socrates and Plato and their examination of how humans make meaning of the world around them (Adams & Searle, 2004), modern critical theory began notably with Marxist economics and its critique of bourgeois society. The philosophers of the Frankfurt school of thought expanded the study of economic oppression to a critique of early 20th Century political and social systems as well (Schwandt, 2007, p. 51). Today’s critical researchers attempt to uncover discrimination, and, in so doing, seek to illuminate possibilities for reform, empowerment, and social justice for groups of people who are marginalized.
In the current study, the schools are perceived as wielding power and influence. This can make immigrant children and their families easy prey to marginalization or alienation.

Social Justice

When educators view students and families as having only deficits, they cannot be practitioners of, or advocates for, social justice. Social justice is a principle of fairness for all members of society (Rawls, 1971/1999). Rawls asserts that a just social system “provides a framework of rights and opportunities… that may be equitably pursued” (p. 28). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) define justice as more than the proverbial “doing no harm.” They contend that educators must be advocates of social justice and must intentionally strive to promote equity “within and beyond” their own communities and “serve the public good for all people’s children” (p. 158).

Levin (2009) agrees that educators and researchers are called to champion social justice in the global community, arguing that “the quest for educational equity is a moral imperative for a society in which education is a crucial determinant of life chances” (p. 5). Highlighting the opportunity for social justice, then, is the end goal of a critical study. By bringing to light societal structures that neglect, discount, or marginalize people, either intentionally or unintentionally, critical researchers seek to “sensitize the research community and…link intellectual work to real life conditions” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 38).

While Latin Americans are traditionally considered monolithically in the literature (e.g. at risk, under achieving), the journey of each participant of the present
study is unique. The failure to differentiate the diversity of experiences and competencies within Latin American populations in research may lead to simplistic assumptions, which infers a kind of stereotyping even among educational scholars (Lee, 2003). Thus, as traditional ethnography examines events and culture (Riessman, 1993), the present study centers on narratives as related by the parents and families to uncover implications for social justice. The experiences and perspectives of the study’s participants are their reality. Like Auerbach’s research (2002), the present study provides a “safe space” for participants to share and reflect on their perspectives (p. 1388).

**Theoretical Framework: Freirean Thought**

The present study is grounded in the work of one of the world’s foremost critical theorists, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), in particular his notions of respect and dialogue. Freire’s primary life-long dedication, the empowerment of marginalized people, provides a relevant overall theoretical undergirding of the present study, as the perspectives of those from the often marginalized non-dominant culture are being examined. By combining theory with action, Freire dedicated his entire adult life to social justice, beginning with his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2000). While Freire was an ultimate critical theorist, he was also an optimist, a believer that positive change is possible (1998/2005). Freire believed theory could and should be put into practice and that individuals could be transformed.

Described as a liberation theologian and educator, Freire “reminded the world of the potential of human agency in the process of social change...,” and he “…encourages us to continually evaluate the consistency of our words and actions as educators” (Hendricks, [http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/freire/sh2.html](http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/freire/sh2.html)). According
to Hendricks, Freire asserted that mere awareness of unjust practice is not sufficient for change. He believed those in power and those who are marginalized engage in discourse that causes them both to be manifestations of the marginalization. For this reason, Freire contended that language is never neutral. Those oppressed internalize the dehumanization, and at the same time, the oppressor is dehumanized by his/her acts. This notion calls for a close examination of the nature of the interactions between school staff and Latin American families, as was done in the present study.

Key to Freirean thought (1998/2005) is the notion that respect for the other and dialogue are the vehicles that establish connections between the non-dominant culture and the dominant culture. Without respect and dialogue, authentic connections between teacher and learner, and between school and home, cannot occur. Freire avowed that as respectful dialogue ensues, the teacher also becomes the learner and the learner also becomes the teacher. In the larger sense, as respectful dialogue ensues, those who are marginalized gain equity. Freire wrote on his concepts of respect and dialogue in a series of letters to teachers:

Without humility, one can hardly listen with respect to those one judges to be too far below one’s own level of competence. (Listening with respect) should not be an act of condescension or resemble the behavior of those fulfilling a vow: “I promise … I will listen to the rude and ignorant parents of my students with attention” No. None of that … How can I listen to the other, how can I hold a dialogue, if I can only listen to myself, if I can only see myself, if nothing or no one other than myself can touch me or move me? (p. 72)
Freire’s belief that true equity requires mutual dialogue that is grounded in respect intersects with the present examination of the perspectives of Latin American families, a typically marginalized population. Ramirez (2003) established that Latin American parents in his study believed schools do not listen or want to listen with respect to the parents’ needs or interests. However, the literature also describes initiatives in which educators and parents build strong connections and foster positive home/school dialogical interactions and outcomes (Allen, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2005). The foremost initiative that exemplifies Freire’s concepts of respect and dialogue is that of Moll’s funds of knowledge as described earlier in this chapter (Gonzalez et al.). Educators who adopt the funds of knowledge concept assume that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., pp. ix-x). According to Moll (2010), connections between home and school that are based on a respect of families’ funds of knowledge lay the foundation for family engagement. For this reason, the funds of knowledge concept also helps guide the present examination of the perspectives of the participants.

Conceptual Framework

The pedagogies of Freire (1998/2005) and Moll (Gonzalez et al., 2005) have much in common and form the conceptual framework for the present study. As critical theorists, they both proposed educational practices that aim to disrupt the deficit mindset of educators. Their philosophies champion building trusting relationships between home and school as the basis for linking what a learner already knows to new knowledge. This requires consideration of one’s environment, language, history, and worldview. The approach by both Freire and Moll advocates investigation of the whole child, including
household knowledge and family interactions. Thus, they both have challenged educators to examine what knowledge is valid to be included in instruction.

As a foundation, both agree that education is a social construct. Dialogue, as seen through the eyes of one’s culture, helps mediate and scaffold to make meaning of new situations for children, and later adults. Dialogue and respect are at the heart of Freire’s (1998/2005) pedagogy and Moll’s funds of knowledge concept (Gonzalez et al., 2005), concluding that through a dialogue of respect, both non-dominant and dominant groups gain when knowledge is shared.

Further, Freire (1998/2005) and Moll (Gonzalez, et al., 2005) both emphasize continual reflection as the educational process unfolds. This metacognition provides educators, the learners, and families alike the liberating opportunity to transform how people from non-dominant cultures are viewed. Thus girded by the theories of Freire and supported by the philosophy of Moll, the present study explores the participants’ context, perceptions, and understandings of school-home connections and family engagement with their children’s schools.

Summary

The theories and studies discussed in this chapter provide an understanding of the importance of family engagement with schools in the successful development of children. The literature suggests that schools and families should operate as true partners (Epstein, 2001), as positive interactions between schools and families increase the parents’ desire to be engaged with the school (Mapp, 2003). Further, the literature supports that interactions of respect are especially critical for establishing connections between schools and families who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and these connections lay the
foundation for family engagement. Respect includes honoring the families’ cultural values as well as their knowledge, skills, and competencies, also known as their funds of knowledge. While the literature reveals a prevailing deficit view of culturally and linguistically diverse populations, there exist successful initiatives that disrupt the deficit view and forge partnerships with families.

It is thus valuable to examine how families view the school’s efforts to connect with them and forge respectful partnerships. While the literature that focuses on the perspectives of Latin American families is emerging, some substantial studies do exist. These studies indicate that Latin American families desire to be connected and engaged with their children’s education, yet as a population, they often face barriers to authentic and respectful connections with schools. The present study thus seeks to uncover how the participants perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them.

Furthermore, studies that include a wider range of socioeconomic and educational levels are being called for in the literature. There appears to be a paucity of qualitative research examining the perspectives of middle class first generation Latin American immigrants regarding their children’s schools. Therefore, the present case study will enrich current literature pertaining to Latin American families’ perspectives on their sense of connection and family engagement with their children’s schools.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the methods used to plan and implement the research design, collect data, and report the findings of my research. In the first section, I discuss the research design, specifically case study, and its applicability to the present investigation. The next two sections describe the research context and setting and how the participants were chosen. Additionally, a brief description of each participant is provided. Section four explains how the data were collected and analyzed. The chapter ends with a summary, which orients the reader to the findings presented in chapters four and five.

The main purpose of the present study is to explore the context, perceptions, and sense of connectedness and family engagement that four middle class families from Latin America have with their children’s U.S. public schools. By exploring parents’ perceptions, factors that lead to the families’ sense of connectedness and/or engagement with their child’s school are uncovered. Because the study examines interactions between school and home as viewed and narrated by immigrant parents, the study uses critical theory and is grounded in the work of Freire (1998/2005), particularly his notion of respect and dialogue. The funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) concept provides a second lens for the examination.

I first created a planning template to consider what research design, data sources, and types of data would be collected (see Appendix A). The completed template presents the two major research questions and provides guidance for the associated sub questions:

1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their...
child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?

a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?

b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?

a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?

b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

Specifically, utilizing the template helped me analyze the need for the information and the particular research design that would best provide the answers. The examination requires complex and detailed data needed to fully answer the research questions. The study’s purpose points to how the families feel (Yin, 2009), and the questions require rich, “thick” descriptions that emerge from multiple sources (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30). Since the study explores the perceptions, impressions, and contextual experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse parents regarding their connection and engagement with the schools attended by their children, establishing a trusting relationship with the participants was essential. Therefore, qualitative inquiry is the selected design.

Research Design: Qualitative Case Study

Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative inquiry as an “… interactive process between the researcher and the participants” that “… uses people’s words and
observable behavior as the primary data” (p. 9). The qualitative approach for the present investigation is case study. Case study is appropriate when the exploration is within “a bounded system (case) … using multiple sources of information” from which themes can be reported (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Additionally, case study is advised when the researcher is not in control over the events being studied and when the context is contemporary and real-life (Schwandt, 2007; Yin, 2009). The present study focuses on specific issues of a bounded system, that is, Latin American families, and uses multiple data sources to reveal the participants’ emic perceptions of connectedness and engagement with their children’s school.

Creswell suggests using no more than five cases in order to gain an in-depth understanding and to capture the depth of the extensive data (p. 76). Therefore, the present case study limits the investigation to four cases, two families from Brazil and two families from Latin American countries where Spanish is spoken, Colombia and Venezuela.

Qualitative Assumptions

Several assumptions were made at the beginning of the study: (a) that the participants have had abundant experiences and possess funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) and cultural capital that could enrich the educational environment, (b) that reality is subjective and the participants’ perceptions are their reality, and (c) that, at times, contradictions or different emphases would occur as stories of their lives and events were retold since one’s reality sometimes changes as he/she narrates experiences (Frank, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). I became both participant and observer at once (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen). This assumption required an attempt to lessen the distance
between myself as researcher and the participants (Creswell, p. 17). Van Manen suggests that to truly understand the experiences of another involves “entering the lifeworld of the person” (p. 69) who is being observed. Such close observation assumes a “relation (to the participant) that is as close as possible while retaining … alertness to the meaning of situations” as the participants tell their stories (p. 69).

The review of literature brought forward axiological assumptions that I also acknowledge to the reader. A major theme within the literature suggests that cultural differences between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse families are often sources of stereotyping and mismatched expectations and assumptions between school staff and families. As a result, a critical framework was adopted. This framework embraced the subjective aspects of the interpretive model and also focused on power differentials in communication between the school, representing the dominant culture, and the participants, representing the non-dominant culture. Therefore, the research questions and interview questions were designed to discover any negative perceptions due to such power differentials. Further, the goal of critical research is not merely to describe how power functions in cultural contexts, but also to recommend change. Critical studies reveal both the oppressed and the oppressor, and such examination can provide the opportunity for reform (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). I hoped for a degree of participant insight and emancipation as experiences were narrated, but I also maintained my own reflectivity and guarded against bias. Additionally, sensitivity to power differentials between the participants and myself, as a researcher from the dominant culture, was essential. Finally, I was cautious about forming generalizations, recognizing that each participant has his/her own unique perspective.
This present study is interpretive, as meanings are ascribed to the findings by organizing the resulting data into themes. This approach, unlike social science, is not intended to predict behavior. Its goal (and mine) is to describe and understand (Martin & Nakayama, 2004) and be the “gatherer of anecdotes” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 69). Social scientists view that communication is influenced by culture, but the interpretivist also sees that communication shapes and forms meaning for individuals, relationships, and entire cultures (Carbaugh, 2005; Martin & Nakayama). Understanding cultural communication through the interpretive paradigm required me to contribute to the communication process and to spend quite some time with the participants, exploring their context. Mutual interest in the topics encouraged the participants to collaborate actively and helped the conversation flow from mere chat to in-depth discussions that revealed their reality and experiences.

Research Context and Setting

The research was conducted in three suburbs of a large southeastern U.S. city. The participants live in adjoining cities that comprise a wide geographic area considered to be suburban metropolitan. The median household incomes of the participants’ cities are remarkably similar, ranging from $70,000 to $73,000 (U.S. Census, 2007). However, the median income is likely skewed by the large number of affluent families scattered throughout these three suburbs. There are also many apartment complexes and smaller homes, especially near the bus lines that join the cities.

Particular demographics of each school cannot be given since the research specifically required anonymity of the participants’ schools. Additionally, some of the participants’ children have attended multiple schools over the years, and three of the
families have two children attending different schools. However, it is known that the
government schools in the participants’ cities range from 30-60% white and 12-30% Latin
American. The mission and vision statements are not available or visible on the websites
for all the schools in the area. Where available, mission statements place an emphasis on
increased achievement, rigorous curriculum, and a safe environment. One school website
mentions partnerships with families, and one school has a school information link in
Spanish.

The research was held in natural and comfortable locations, either in the
participants’ homes, as reminiscent of the ethnographic research models of Gonzalez et
al. (2005), or in local venues. Three of the four families in this study live in apartments,
which are located in large apartment complexes. The fourth participant lives in a single
family home in a small subdivision adjoining a main suburban road.

Research Participants

Sampling for the present study was three-tiered: purposeful, convenience, and
snowball (Creswell, 2007). The sampling began with recommendations made by the
director of an adult language program and by a coordinator for bilingual community
liaisons in a local school system. These two key informants were chosen because of their
expertise, background, and daily interactions with local Latin American community. The
coordinator is a Venezuelan who also serves as director of a non-profit summer program
for Latin American children. The programs the informants serve include families with a
variety of socioeconomic and educational levels. I am a Saturday volunteer teacher in the
language program and have attended functions with the summer program, which
provided me access and credibility.
The criterion for the sample was that the prospective Latin American parents have at least a high school education. A parent’s experience with his/her own schooling establishes the framework with which the child’s school is understood (Auerbach, 2002). Unlike parents who have had unsuccessful school careers or no education, the study’s participants approach schooling with positive memories and experiences. They foresee likely options for upward mobility for their children and affirm education as the vehicle for future success. Additionally, the purposeful selection of these participants eliminated poverty as a factor for this study and reduced the possibility of a poverty bias, i.e. that educators’ perception of poverty heavily influenced the results of the research.

After the key informants suggested names of prospective participants, I then contacted the families. The families who were willing to participate in the study were all considered to have middle class social status in their home countries. All participants were enthusiastic about the invitation to participate in the study and willingly signed the consent form (see Appendix B).

As the study began, the mother in each family emerged as the primary spokesperson. This was not purposefully planned but was instead a result of either availability or the participants’ inclination to proffer the mother as representative. However, some snowballing occurred as the investigation progressed, and interviews and conversations were also held with other family members, such as teens, grandparents, and spouses. All four mothers are first-generation immigrants to the U.S. who have at least one child attending public school in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. Two participants are from Brazil, one is from Colombia, and one is from Venezuela. The mothers speak English with varying degrees of proficiency and have studied the language
for a variety of reasons: for job and social success; to help their children with schoolwork; to communicate better in medical, legal, and other professional interactions; and to live a more meaningful, fulfilling life in the U.S. The children in each family are now bilingual, and some have competency in multiple languages. Although a deeper description of each participant will be provided in chapter four, the four mothers are introduced here. All names used for the participants are pseudonyms.

*Carmen*

Carmen, 37, from Venezuela, depicts herself as largely engaged with her children’s school. She is the married mother of two children – an eighth grade daughter and a first grade son. Of the participants, Carmen has the largest family of origin. Most of her 15 siblings still live in Venezuela, as does her father. When Carmen was very young, her father owned a factory for dairy products and there was money to travel. However, after changes in her county’s economics and her parents’ divorce following high school, Carmen began her own career in sales. In Venezuela, she attended college periodically for three semesters and says she would like to return to school in the future. She demonstrates a flair for decorating and has decorated for two large school events. Presently, Carmen takes care of a neighbor’s child during the day and considers her primary role as the supportive mother of her own children. Carmen’s English fluency is emerging.

*Laura*

Laura, a Brazilian woman in her late thirties, is the mother of two sons, and she is married to a U.S. citizen. Laura graduated from public schools in Brazil and attended some college there, studying art and design and later primary education. She worked in
business for an international bank and spent some months living in Germany before coming to the U.S. Laura presents as forthright and curious; she has many interests. Recently, she began a home catering business, which allows her flexibility to spend time with her preschool son.

*Linda*

Linda, in her mid-fifties, is the mother of two teen daughters. Linda graduated from college in Brazil and has worked full-time since she graduated from high school. She studied law and worked in the legal departments of various international businesses. Linda is very close to her daughters, a bond forged even closer after the death of Linda’s two husbands. Linda does not consider herself involved in volunteer activities at her daughter’s school, but she volunteers on Saturdays for an English language program for immigrants. Linda is now quite fluent in English.

*Rita*

Rita, 27, is from a small family in Colombia, and she is a new immigrant to the U.S. Rita worked in sales for an advertising company after graduation from a private high school in Colombia. Her first grade daughter, Paula, is learning English in school, and Rita studies with Paula every evening to help her achieve school success. Rita’s parents owned their own businesses in Colombia and later in the U.S., and they assisted Rita in her move to the U.S. Rita and daughter Paula currently live with Rita’s parents, who now work for a local company following the close of their business. Rita’s English fluency is continuing to emerge.
**Human subjects protection and relationship**

The Belmont principles (National Institute of Health, 1979), established for the protection of human subjects of research, require that researchers operate with respect for persons, with beneficence, and with justice. Following these guidelines, I understood the ethical obligations entailed in entering into a collaborative relationship with participants. The study was not mere data collection; I became a collector of their personal stories and perceptions. Because the participants are from a culture that is frequently investigated by immigration authorities, it was essential to develop a relationship of trust, rapport, and collaboration. It was affirmed that they could stop the study at any time or refuse to answer any question they deemed uncomfortable. To further establish candor, I informed participants that it was unnecessary to know the name of their child’s school or district and that pseudonyms would be used in the report. I offered to have the consent form translated to the participants’ native language, showing respect for the research process and for the individuals involved. However, all participants declined the translation and accepted the English language version.

**Data Collection and Data Sources**

The present study utilized five sources of data: in-depth biographical interviews, open-ended interviews, observations during interviews, informal conversations, and participant-created collages. The data represent 62 hours of face-to-face dialogue over the course of 17 weeks in naturalistic settings. The in-depth biographical and open-ended interviews were semi-structured and framed by guiding questions to assist in answering the research questions.
In-Depth Biographical Interviews

The in-depth biographical questions (see Appendix C) explored the context of the families, that is, their values, customs, beliefs, and histories. In order to understand how culturally and linguistically diverse families perceive they are valued at their child’s school, how they perceive efforts exist to connect with them, and the factors within the schools that contribute to their feelings of connectedness or engagement, it was important to know something of their childhood, education, prior school experiences, expectations of the school system, why they came to the U.S., and their aspirations for the future.

Open-ended Interviews

The open-ended interview questions (see Appendix D) probed participants’ perceptions of the school’s efforts to connect with them and factors leading to either connection/engagement or disconnection. Van Manen (1990) avers that the art of interviewing is the ability to “keep the question open” and to continue asking questions (p. 98). Because qualitative inquiry is emergent and evolving, I was not limited by these questions alone. The participants and I became “co-investigators” of the research questions, and while we stayed oriented to the research questions, issues that related to the topic were also explored. Especially pertinent were any topics elucidating the school’s efforts to know and utilize the families’ funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

Informal conversations

Informal conversations were guided by some suggested topics (see Appendix E) and covered some of the same topics as the open-ended interviews but were more casual in nature than formal interviews. They provided a means of building amity and trust with
family members and added richness to the data collected in the more formal interviews. I probed any emotive comments and listened for tensions and contradictions. Most conversations were held the same day as the in-depth interviews, but some occurred in separate meetings.

**Observations**

I observed the participants during interviews and conversations, paying close attention to details such as body language, tone of voice, contradictions between facial expressions and words spoken, and other nonverbal cues. Observational data were recorded as field notes, either unobtrusively during the interviews or shortly thereafter. For example, if I noticed tears in the participant eyes when a particular subject was broached, I made a small notation in my field notes but wrote about the incident and antecedent after returning home. Likewise, some topics were discussed with a passionate voice, and these were noted when transcribing recordings.

**Collages**

Collages are unique visual representations designed to both “produce and represent knowledge” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 317). Bessette (2008) recommends the use of visual representations “in conjunction with other methods of inquiry” to complement and add depth to an educational research study (p. 1379). The use of collage enhanced the participants’ verbal accounts by allowing the conscious or unconscious expression of opinions, experiences, and perceptions that participants may not otherwise be able to produce. I provided poster board for each participant but requested that he/she produce three collages at home between sessions. Some of the collages made by the participants were actually colored drawings, as the participants interpreted the prompts in their own
manner. Because some participants included photographs or other identifying information on their collages, for confidentiality reasons, not all of the posters will be included in this document. The following prompts were given:

Collage #1: “Create a collage that will make me feel like I am back in your country.”

Collage #2: “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your child’s school.”

Collage #3: “Create a collage that represents, in a perfect world, what your relationship with your child’s school would be.”

Interviews and conversations were recorded on a small digital device. Recordings, notes, personal notations, and completed collages were maintained in a locked location in my home and considered confidential property. Finally, an audit trail was maintained on a password-protected personal computer and flash drive. This information includes a diary of activities, notes of consultations with colleagues, and personal reflections related to the research process.

Data Analysis

The present study focused on the perspectives of Latin American parents, with the factors influencing parental perceptions being extrapolated from the narratives and collages presented by each participant. Specific issues (connection and engagement with the school) were explored with specific participants (Latin American families) within a conceptual framework of critical theory. The results were gleaned primarily from interviews and supported by the collages and observations. They were examined and constantly compared, observant for any indication of exclusivity or disenfranchisement
resulting from the power differential between the school system and parents (Freire, 1998/2005; Martin and Nakayama, 2004). However, to generate “comprehensive and accurate descriptions” (Stake, 1995, p. 107) and to “preserve the multiple realities” of data (p.12), I interpreted with caution.

The in-depth biographical interviews provided an understanding of the participants’ past experiences, expectations, and their own conceptual framework in light of their current context. The focus of my analysis was not solely on content; also noted were the participants’ emphasis, body language, tone, and other nonverbal clues that accompanied the content. Initially, recorded conversations and interviews were transcribed literally. Next, to reduce data, as recommended by Riessman (1993), selected portions were retranscribed for a more detailed analysis undergirded by the study’s conceptual framework and research questions. Significant statements were computer color coded in red, especially statements that referred to positive school connections or tensions within interactions with the school. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), notations were made in the margins of fieldnotes, and I examined data from each participant to determine common themes. This data helped me determine what preliminary questions were needed for the subsequent session with participants. Also noted were contradictions within participants’ narratives and contrasting perspectives among participants. At the end of each session, themes that emerged were recorded on separate sheets with the assistance of Excel® software. Some of the themes that emerged were connectedness, the importance of relatives and fictive kin, communication (both positive and negative), school appreciation of other cultures, and resilience.
The collages and drawings required a different type of analysis. I examined the collages and drawings constructed by the participants and analyzed holistically (Bessette, 2008) and by the type and content of the chosen images as well as by the amount, depth, and type of color. Apparent themes and symbolism were recorded. Although this interpretation is subjective, asking each participant to also describe and interpret his/her poster assisted the interpretations. An ensuing discussion with the participant allowed for member checking. Content, symbolism, emotions, and meanings generated by the participants’ explanations of the posters were then recorded. Similarities and differences between the participants’ interview responses and their posters were noted, scrutinizing areas of overlap or contradiction.

Trustworthiness of Data

In her discussion of qualitative research, Riessman (1993) discusses the difference between trustworthiness and truth. Experimental research deals with formal procedures that attempt to show reliable and valid truths. Quantitative research is objective, whereas qualitative research “moves in a social world” (p. 65). Nevertheless, the trustworthiness of qualitative study can be shown. Although the present study did not produce maxims that could be considered universal truths, steps were taken to protect the trustworthiness of the research.

The first step was conferring with an expert on culturally and linguistically diverse families, a facilitator for a local school system’s international transition program. She is a South American who immigrated to the U.S. during high school speaking no English. Now, she has an advanced degree and serves as liaison for culturally and
linguistically diverse families and the school system. Her expertise was helpful for understanding family concerns and for the development of guiding questions.

A similar consultation with the bilingual community coordinator who helped to identify possible participants provided additional trustworthiness at the beginning of the interview process. Her suggestion of two research articles for review gave support for the relevance of the present study.

The use of multiple data sources and an ongoing comparison of data sources also provided trustworthiness to the study (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stake, 1995). Reflecting, coding, and analyzing responses or silences at the end of each session with participants provided the opportunity to restate and/or refine questions at subsequent sessions. This practice of ongoing analysis also allowed for finding commonalities among participants. Member checking during conversations and at the end of the interviews further strengthened the investigation.

Finally, trustworthiness was obtained by examining and analyzing the study’s findings concurrently with the literature review. Stake (1995) describes triangulation as finding coherence, intersections, or patterns among several different data sources (p. 108). In the present study, the multiple data sources were examined for factors addressing issues of power, respect, connectedness, and engagement. The instances in which the study’s data corroborate or contradict the literature are pointed out in the findings chapters.

Summary

Chapter three outlined the methods used to investigate the two major research questions and associated sub questions, which are:


1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?
   a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?
   a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

The research utilized critical case study to explore the background, context, and perceptions of four Latin American middle class families who have children in U.S. public schools and the ways in which they perceived the schools make efforts to connect with them. The study’s conceptual framework was guided by the work of Freire (1968/2000), which is characterized by advocacy of liberation of the oppressed through respect and dialogue, and the work of Moll (2010), which champions school-family collaboration built on the knowledge, skills, and competencies of families. The data collected through multiple sources revealed common themes as well as tensions and contradictions. An ongoing review of the literature and expertise provided by knowledgeable consultants strengthened the study.
Chapter four provides a deeper portraiture of the major participants and will show that a sense of connectedness is crucial for Latin Americans. In the chapter, I assert that a family’s sense of connectedness with the school lays the foundation for family engagement with the school. I further argue that respect is a critical factor for establishing connections between school and families. The remainder of the chapter reports findings regarding the participants’ perception of the degree of connection with the school and factors that encourage this connection.

Throughout the study, the participants’ perceptions regarding their child’s school were examined through tone of voice, body language, statements spoken, and images they chose for their visual representations. The participant families appear to yearn to be respected as individuals with unique backgrounds and cultures. However, the findings show there are factors that cause tensions and even alienation. These factors will be examined critically in chapter five.
CHAPTER 4
HOW DOES YOUR CHILD’S SCHOOL MAKE EFFORTS TO CONNECT?

Introduction

This chapter is guided by the first research question and associated sub questions, which are: 1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?

   a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

The chapter begins with a description of the participants and their families in order to gain an understanding of the life experiences, interconnected family structures, and social resources of each family. I supply this information to paint a picture of each participant and because each immigrant’s background affects his/her impression and comprehension of the U.S. school system.

The remainder of the chapter will present findings that (a) highlight the importance of connection for Latin American families as members of a high context culture, i.e. one that generally values group interconnectedness (Noel, 2000), and (b) explore the participants’ sense of connection with their child’s school, in particular how they perceive the schools make efforts to connect with them. The findings of my study suggest that a sense of connectedness provides the foundation for family engagement
with the school. I further argue that respect is a critical factor for establishing connections and family engagement.

*Carmen*

Carmen’s family illustrates the strong family interconnectedness that will be shown with each participant. Carmen and her husband Nicholas are native Venezuelans, and together they have a son in first grade and a daughter, Valentina, from Carmen’s previous marriage who is entering high school. Carmen and her daughter, Valentina, moved to the U.S. seven years ago. Valentina assisted her mother enthusiastically with translation and clarifications at each interview session. The two females appear to be sisters, and they frequently finished each other’s sentences during the course of this investigation. Carmen and her husband are in their late thirties, and present with an energetic and welcoming manner. The family lives in an apartment, where Carmen is a caregiver for a neighbor’s toddler while Carmen’s husband works two jobs. Carmen’s mother lives about 10 miles away and is an after-school caregiver. She gives family support, brings baked goods, and drives Carmen and the children on errands since Carmen does not drive.

Carmen’s husband Nicholas’ large extended family in Venezuela manages a small rural farm where coffee and bananas are raised. When Nicholas returns for occasional visits, the son sometimes accompanies him to play with his cousins and ride horses. Carmen described these visits: “They love to ride horses and take trail rides … each child gets a hat and a big basket to collect oranges for the family. Orange trees are something he wouldn’t see around here.” Carmen’s comment on these experiences not only illustrates the family connections, but also suggests that she places value on her son’s
expanded knowledge. This description of a young child learning to ride horses and help
with a family business highlights the depth of Carmen’s son funds of knowledge.

Carmen attended private school through high school graduation and says she was
a good student as a child, which she also expects of her own children as illustrated in an
informal conversation: “Valentina (daughter) made three A’s and a B, but I expect all
A’s.” Carmen’s schools were small, and students in every grade wore uniforms. Carmen
contrasted the easy availability of teachers and staff at her small Venezuelan school with
what she perceives as the busy nature of the U.S. schools, as exemplified by this
interview comment, “Here, there is so much protocol...everything takes so long.” This
quote suggests Carmen perceives a difference between the busy U.S. culture and what
Carmen sees as a more relaxed Latin American culture in addition to the difference
between a small and large school.

As a child, Carmen’s father showed he valued knowledge by taking the children
on educational vacations. She described a tour of an Amazonian indigenous Indian
reservation and remembered being frightened by the visit. However, she learned much
about the interactions of history, geography, and politics of South America and has
passed that down to her children as significant funds of knowledge.

Data revealed the interwoven nature of the family’s support network as Carmen
portrayed her 15 siblings, various uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters during informal
conversations. After high school, she was provided room and board by an uncle, and an
aunt helped with care of Carmen’s daughter. When Carmen decided she needed
technology classes to improve her job skills, a cousin helped her obtain credit so that she
could attend night classes while working during the day, further illustrating the family’s
high value on learning. Carmen’s mother and brother assisted her move to the U.S., and a Latin American friend not only arranged for legal matters regarding a former husband, but also provided her a job.

Carmen and her husband consider themselves engaged in their children’s education. For instance, as will be shown, Carmen was involved with several volunteer opportunities in both children’s schools, and both parents revealed they place high priority on school success by their expectation of good grades. Importantly, they play a supportive role with strict study routines, emphasis on schoolwork, and exploration of community offerings. For instance, during the course of the present study, Carmen and her husband, Nicholas, attended open houses at their children’s schools, a special school event for fathers, and activities for a three-week summer educational enrichment program for Latin American children. The summer program provided Latin American children aged three to six with math, language arts, and music activities and culminated in a luncheon event for the families of over 100 children. Nicholas took pictures and filmed the event, and Carmen was responsible for decorations for the event as she described with this excerpt:

I am good at decorating. I made all the centerpieces according to the graduation theme. Each one was a paper graduation hat and a box filled with good toys-animal and color (flash) cards, and hair accessories. I used good toys, not trash: some bags had a diary and some had maracas.

Even her choice of items for the children, such as diaries, flash cards, and maracas, suggests the value Carmen places on quality items geared toward learning. In a later informal conversation, Carmen revealed she would like to attend college in the future: “I
want to study English (intensively) and take classes that would help me have my own decorating business.” This excerpt illustrates that she recognizes her own knowledge and skills and also values education that she believes will help her be successful in her assimilation to the U.S. culture.

Laura

Laura, a middle child among five brothers, is from São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil. Laura is artistic, as evidenced by her drawings, and in interviews and conversations, her voice was expressive. In her in-depth biographical interview, she recalled a happy childhood:

I was a happy kid. When I was young, there was no violence or poverty. Everything was simple, and all the neighbors were like family. I remember going to school on bright, sunny days…meeting all my friends and my favorite teacher. I was very dedicated with my chores and homework. I went to public school, and they required uniforms … a white starched shirt and blue skirt.

Having five brothers was difficult at times, “but nice,” she recalled, “because we had lunch and dinner together every day.” The childhood picture Laura painted here seems an upbeat one, possibly idealistic, filled with networked children and adults who are connected with chores, meals, and schoolwork. Her quote suggests that, even with the tensions inherent with a large family, the presence of parents and siblings together at meals was important. School was remembered in a positive light; even the “sunny days” and “white starched shirt” of her memory suggests brightness and optimism. On one of her collages, Laura depicted children in white-shirted school uniforms.
Laura married young, and like three of four participants, worked in the day and went to school at night. Laura’s biographical interview revealed her respect for education as she described her two years of college: “I got home at 1:00 a.m. It’s dangerous at night now (but not then), but college is at night.” Laura’s comment reflects that she was willing to attend classes until late at night after working all day in order to advance her education. Laura studied art and design, but stopped college with the unexpected birth of her son, Lucas, who she considers “a gift from God,” reflecting Orozco’s (2008) description of the “special place” of Latin American children in the family (p. 21).

Laura’s voice did not express regret that her studies stopped, suggesting the importance of her son’s arrival. Additionally, she returned to college when her son was older, illustrating the value she places on obtaining a college education.

Although Laura said when she was young there was no violence, she spoke of the increased danger in her home city of São Paulo:

If he (my son) had to go to college in Brazil, I would have white hair because it’s dangerous at night … most everyone works in the day. They also even have high school at night.

Laura seems to assume her son will attend college, but the safety of her child is paramount. A desire for safety coupled with the increase in São Paulo’s violence since her childhood is likely a factor for her move to the U.S. as her son approached his teen years. The following indicates her reflections: “I didn’t think about the U.S. when he was seven. I pictured him working a lot (in Brazil) and having a family. In Brazil, we care about the college years.” With her son now close to entering college, which she cares about, Laura appeared relieved as she discussed his future. In an oddly neutral, even
detached voice that did not match her words, she went on to describe a 2005 home
invasion in Brazil in which her son, Lucas, was held by one of the intruders during the
robbery. This event and an attempted personal mugging on a city street possibly
contributed to her perspective as she compared her current relatively safe U.S. environs
with São Paulo in this excerpt: “Teachers (and schools) are more respected here (in the
U.S.). You can have technology in the classroom. In Brazil, there are only chalkboards
because kids break in to steal.” Her comment suggests that the need for her son to be
educated in a safe and secure environment is met in his U.S. school.

Interestingly, as she interpreted her own collage that depicted Brazil, Laura
seemed to have put the past violence behind by saying, “I didn’t want to put it in (depict
the violence)…I only wanted to put the good things in.” It is possible that this comment
reflects Laura’s desire to present her home country in better light for the investigation.
However, further into the research, I noted other statements that indicated Laura does not
dwell on negative past events, as exemplified below:

At age 25, I took classes to be a kindergarten teacher, but after I got divorced, I
needed to work, so I improved my English and moved higher in my job at an
international bank … I came to the U.S. to see if I liked it and to try out the U.S.
schools. Then I enrolled Lucas (her son) in an intensive English course in Brazil.
It was a big risk, but I didn’t want to lose this battle. It’s too important …

This quote illustrates many things about Laura. Her enjoyment of school as a
child possibly led to her to desire to be a teacher, but the divorce caused a change in
plans. She thus looked to the future and planned for success, despite the risk, showing her
determination. By enrolling in English classes, Laura showed her desire to connect and
assimilate successfully to the U.S. culture as well as her resolve for her son to be successful in school.

Laura researched the U.S. schools in the area and determined that, because of his strong intellect and interests, her son Lucas should attend a magnet school. Laura said she came from Brazil with many fears about U.S. schools based on narrated experiences of others. Nevertheless, she said she knew her son would adapt. Upon arrival, she solicited the assistance of another Latin American student to assure a smooth transition for her son Lucas. Gonzalez et al. (2005) describe that resourceful community exchanges often occur within Latin American cultures.

Laura’s family clearly values learning. For example, Lucas, Laura’s son, discussed his advanced placement classes during an informal conversation: “I really liked calculus and literature class … and the book by Dante is my favorite … I learned how to read Hindi last summer, for no reason at all.” Laura affirmed her son’s intellectual curiosity with this quote: “If you give Lucas money, he goes to the bookstore. He has about 200 books.” Lucas and Laura provide a rich learning environment for his preschool half-brother with books and workbooks. This indicates the value they place on early learning as a path to future success. Laura’s husband, who is from the U.S., provides the family financial and emotional support. Both children speak Portuguese and English, which helps the family preserve strong connections with friends and relatives in Brazil. Although Laura does not drive, she uses technology avidly to correspond and maintain relationships, as does her son. He returns to Brazil to visit grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends about once a year, reflecting the dual frame of reference of today’s immigrants described in the literature (Fuller & Coll, 2010; Lopez & Livingston, 2010).
An exploration of Laura’s funds of knowledge also uncovered entrepreneurial acumen; she recently established a home-based business selling Brazilian delicacies that she bakes. For Laura to bake food that represents her culture and sell it via the Internet not only demonstrates her business sense, but it suggests her desire to make connections that share her culture’s richness with others. With their high regard for learning and their rich funds of knowledge, the perspectives of Laura and her son about the U.S. schools are valuable to the present investigation.

Linda

Linda, a twice-widowed mother with two daughters, moved to the U.S. nine years ago from Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil. Although both daughters were of elementary age when Linda came to the U.S., one daughter is now in high school and the other in a state college. During the week, Linda works for a Brazilian firm that conducts business with Brazil, so she mostly speaks in Portuguese rather than English at work. However, she is fluent in English. She participates in a weekly conversation partnership with an instructor from the U.S. in an adult non-profit English language program, where she is also a Saturday volunteer. Linda’s volunteer commitment illustrates her desire to connect with other immigrants, somewhat as fictive kin, helping others to acculturate to the U.S. It also demonstrates that helping others learn English is important enough that she is willing to give up weekend mornings to volunteer.

Linda’s conversation partnership indicates her desire to perfect her own English, as illustrated by this quote: “I want to be part of the English system …I have business vocabulary, but it’s hard for me in conversations. My children speak fast, and sometimes I have trouble understanding them.” It appears that her continued study of the language is
not only for business and social success, but also to maintain an intimate connection to her daughters.

Linda spent her childhood in São Paulo, where her father worked for a bank and her mother managed the home. Her younger brother was killed by a school bus, and as an emotional consequence, Linda cannot recall her schooling for the first seven years. She stated in two interviews, “It’s the worst thing that can happen to a mom.” The tragic event perhaps increased Linda’s desire to preserve close connections to her own children, a closeness that was observed through words and body language throughout the study.

Linda and her sisters attended a rigorous private high school in Brazil. In interviews, she contended that the public schools in her city were not good; this excerpt provides a glimpse of Linda’s viewpoint:

In Brazil anyone who can pay even a little goes to private. … in the private school, if you don’t like it, you leave and go to another school. A private school is a business. They don’t have participation because you (the parents) pay for it. It’s assumed the school takes care of everything. There is even less involvement in the public schools in Brazil. Here (in the U.S.), there is a lot of participation and that’s good. I admire a lot of things they have here. Parents here are more upfront and involved.

Linda’s quote suggests that she views family engagement as positive, but not something she was accustomed to. In open-ended interviews, Linda revealed that she is not very engaged in her daughter’s school, saying that work schedules and traffic obstacles restrict her involvement. She indicated her initial surprise at how much influence parents in the U.S. have in their children’s schools, and she concluded, “Your (U.S.) system has been
here a while. Your tax money is here, so you (U.S. parents) want to manage it, but you take things very seriously.” Her emphasis on the words manage and but may imply a slight criticism. In a later interview, Linda’s responses suggested she was alienated from some parent activities because “they (the other parents) didn’t need me.”  

In biographical interviews, Linda recalled her teen years as optimistic, with “many friends and boyfriends and the beginning of a new Brazilian musical movement.” In interviews, Linda described her high school as, “really tough … and you don’t have an option of what to study.” She elaborated:

I’ll never forget my teacher who put all the desks in a U with him in the middle. He would call us up and we had to know all the tenses…but he was not mean. That’s one thing we don’t have in Brazil…teachers and kids were not mean…Everyone has a uniform, so everyone is on the same level; I don’t remember people being competitive like they are here.

Linda’s quote reflects differences in culture, providing a comparison of the independent, competitive nature of the U.S. culture and the collectivist nature of the Latin American culture. Like the other participants, Linda mentioned school uniforms as a positive, an equalizer among students.

The family’s funds of knowledge were made known as Linda described how her resourceful mother sold off family belongings during difficult years. Without a high school diploma, her mother learned to sew, knit, crochet, and sell complicated sweaters and dresses with intricate designs. Linda’s mother was an excellent money manager, a trait Linda also acquired, as suggested by her successful support of her family on one income. In Brazil, Linda worked in a corporate legal department to help support her
mother and sisters and attended secretarial school and then a college law program at night. She described this relationship:

    My dad passed away, so I paid for both my sisters to learn English, supported mom, and bought her an apartment. My mom would come across town every weekend and take care of the kids. This is typical in Brazil.

Linda’s description shows the interdependence of family connections common to her culture and also illustrates the priorities held in Linda’s personal belief system.

    Like the other participants, Linda maintains connections in two worlds, the U.S. culture and that of her Latin American contacts and family. The following provides a further understanding of the significance of these connections: “I think it was important for them (my daughters) to go back to Brazil every year to be with our family and for my mom to come here. But it was hard for (my mom); she didn’t speak English and I work, so it’s better that we go there.”

**Rita**

    Of the four participants, Rita, has been in the U.S. the least amount of time, just over a year. Rita is from Colombia, and she and her first-grade daughter, Paula, live in an apartment with Rita’s parents. With an architect mother and a business owner father, Rita’s childhood seemed secure until a downturn in the economy and an increase in violence and kidnapping in Colombia. Unlike the other participants, Rita, age 27, left her country under personal duress and moved in with her parents and brother, who at the time had moved to the U.S. There, she married an American she had met on previous visits to her parents. When Rita’s parents and brother suffered job losses, they moved to the
current state in the southeastern U.S., and Rita followed with her daughter but without her new husband, a situation she describes here:

I have the possibility to live here, my parents are working, my husband is helping me, and I have all the time for (daughter) Paula. I help her with homework and trying to help her learn English. I know a little more and I can help her. It’s difficult for me and my husband to be separated, but he understands that she needs her mother.

Rita seems to believe it is important for her to be home before and after school and for Paula to have the family support of grandparents at this time, as she could not afford daycare. The well-being and academic success of her child appears paramount to Rita, and her role as mother and as a support for her daughter’s learning appears to be of primary importance to her. In her former country, Rita’s sense of self-worth had been threatened by domestic violence, but she appears to be growing in confidence, as illustrated by the preceding excerpt. The special place of the child in the family is suggested by Rita’s comments (Orozco, 2008).

In biographical interviews, Rita described the Colombian Carnival and her role as a costumed dancer in her home city, which is known for its music and arts. Thus, it was natural that the first images she recalled about school were the physical activities similar to a Conga line that teachers employed as memory games, as she described here:

We would gather in rounds like a snake with a tail and head for Cola y Cabeza (tail and head). For example, in history, one (a student) at the head would be asked a question. If you gave the wrong answer, you had to go to the back. We
would do this one or two days a month. The teacher knew this would help us to learn many things.

As suggested by Rita’s voice and smile as she told this story, she views classroom learning as positive and enjoyable. Further, the incident she described drew on her funds of knowledge, that is, her skills and styles of interacting, to make learning meaningful.

In response to a specific question, Rita compared the U.S. public schools to those in her home country:

In Colombia, it’s not easy to get involved. Many kids can’t read because it’s very expensive to go to private school. Public education is not everywhere because the government doesn’t have enough money.

Although Rita did not specifically state that she could not afford private school for her daughter if she had stayed in Colombia, the description of her own current economic situation and that of her home country implies this. Throughout the investigation, Rita stressed her desire for academic success for her daughter. Her intention is to stay in the U.S. for this reason. Rita’s parents and siblings provided the strong family connections that brought Rita to the U.S., and they continue to provide the family support she needs at this time. Rita disclosed that her hope is to rejoin her husband and return to school herself when her daughter is older and finances are more secure. During an interview, she explained, “I’m just waiting for Nicole to grow a little more so I can start studies and improve my English.” It seems Rita understands that her own continued studies will help provide for her upward mobility and an increased sense of self-worth.
The Uniqueness of the Participants of This Study

The participants of the present study belie a common U.S. society stereotype that Latin American families live in poverty and are at risk for school failure. The data suggest that all four participants place a high premium on education and are industrious and earnest. All four mothers were reared with the belief that completion of high school and beyond is essential for success in life. They do not have stories of regret about their own schooling, i.e. what Auerbach (2002) calls “cautionary tales” about education (p. 1375). The mothers expressed expectation for their own success and high expectations for their children, as extensions of themselves.

Although the investigation encompassed the perspectives of family representatives, i.e. parents, children, and grandmother - the mother in each case became the primary respondent. While not specifically chosen for this role when the research began, the families assumed that the mothers, as experts on their own children, would provide the lens through which a study of their family would be viewed. Because of the strong connection between mother and child, the mothers were powerful respondents for an examination of affiliation with their children’s schools. As will be shown by their responses, the mothers articulated the families’ values and belief systems as well as a clear understanding of their perspectives of their children’s schools.

Family Connections Are Important for Immigrants

Immigrants come to the U.S. for a multitude of reasons, but often there are dramatic stories that serve as the catalysts. Families who come under duress, such as Rita’s, from Colombia, or to escape political upheavals, such as Carmen’s, from Venezuela, forge a special connection, sharing their determination for a better life.
The experience of Rita, the young mother from Colombia, illustrates the intensity of family bonds and importance of connections. Rita was able to escape from domestic violence in Colombia and come with her daughter to the U.S. thanks to the legal ingenuity of her cousin and father. She recalled in her in-depth biographical interview: “They helped me with a lawyer, and the lawyer helped me make all the papers so I could stay with (daughter) Nicole legally.” Now, Rita, her parents, and a nearby uncle share in the rearing of Rita’s daughter. As Rita related her family’s role in this life experience, her voice was strongly expressive, suggesting the intensity of her connection to the family that helped to save her life. Navarrete and Fessler (2005) discuss this connection in terms of affiliation. They found that cultural groups experiencing the same stress tend to stay strongly affiliated and rely on connected networks of others for strength.

Unlike European immigrants of previous generations, young Latin American immigrants continue close ties to their home country. To stay connected, they use email, cell phone, and social media extensively (Lopez & Livingston, 2010) and often send money and gifts to families in their country of origin. I found this to be true for all four participants. I particularly observed the extensive use of electronic social media to connect overseas; each time I visited the home of three of the participants, I noticed the computer open and connected to Facebook®, a popular social media website. Ringing cell phones, with family members calling to check the participants’ well-being were common throughout the sessions.
Mother/Child Connections

As one indication of the close connection in families, the participants revealed an intense bond between mothers and their children. With mothers and children, the relationship typically goes beyond connection to affiliation. To affiliate means to bring or receive into close connection as a member (Merriam-Webster, 2010). The word is derived from the Medieval Latin past participle *affiliare*, which means to adopt as a son. Such a description brings to mind a mutual bond – a sense of union, alliance, and devotion. During informal conversations, questions about the mothers’ feelings were often answered in terms of their children, necessitating the need to further explore their answers. For example, when asked how the school shows it cares about *you*, mothers often related incidents that happened to their children.

One of the data sources suggests an intense affiliation between mother and child. Given the prompt, “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your child’s school,” Linda, Brazilian mother of two daughters, created a two-sided poster, with each side representing a daughter and filled with photocopies of awards and honor roll certificates. By each daughter’s name, Linda glued two diamond-like crystals. Diamonds traditionally represent cherished love and purity. Linda’s diamonds may possibly have a double meaning, that of mother-daughter love and also symbolic of the diamond on the Brazil flag, which represents the mineral richness of Brazil, the family’s home country. An image of Linda (mother) is not represented on the collage at all, even though the collage prompt requested a depiction of her relationship with the school. It appears Linda views her relationship with the school vicariously, through her daughter’s relationship with the school, suggesting an intense mother-daughter connection. When probed about a
special letter from one teacher that was glued to her daughter Anna’s side of the poster, Linda explained:

What I like about the award … is that it’s not just a certificate, but a personal letter. … Several of the teachers had been having a lot of trouble with Anna, and here she was given a Shining Star award. We had moved to a new country, and Anna had left behind all her friends and then lost her second father. The teacher didn’t understand how hard that is on a kid. When Anna kept getting into trouble, I finally went to the school and told him why. The teacher took Anna as an assistant in the class, and Anna improved so much she got the award. I cried, the teacher cried, we all cried that day.

As she related the story, Linda’s voice and facial expression showed an emotion that could be interpreted as pride, suggesting that her daughter’s award represented a significant triumph for her as well as her daughter. It appears from this excerpt that the teacher had previously been insensitive to (or unaware of) the family’s circumstances. In this case, dialogue, initiated by Linda, led to her daughter’s success and to a positive connection between home and school. “We all cried that day” implies that the connection became a bond that was felt intensely by Linda, her daughter, and the teacher. The inclusion of the letter on the poster infers the special relationship between Linda and her daughter, as described by Valdés (1996). Reyna (2008) uses the term “dream makers” to describe parents who advocate for their children in difficult school situations (p. 81), and Freire (1998/2005) emphasized the significance of dialogue as the vehicle to forge positive connections between home and school.
Fictive Kinship and Connectedness

Close connections are not always blood relatives. All four families did, and continue to, generate and utilize important Latin American connections in the U.S., in this manner devising their own support system of liaisons. Boutte (2002) describes this interwoven connection of support within a certain culture as fictive kinship. While cultures are not uniform, culture is also not incidental (p. 9), and sharing information and connecting with others who have a similar language or worldview increases access to the dominant culture. An example of this is provided by Laura, mother of two sons from Brazil. For the first few weeks of school, Laura, who had experienced violence at the hands of home intruders in her home country, was fearful that her son would be bullied in his U.S. school. She solicited a Latin American neighbor to ride the bus with him, shadow him at school, and report back to her. Another example of the use of fictive kin can be seen with participant, Rita, from Colombia. Rita’s Spanish-speaking neighbor accompanied her to school registration and explained the intricacies of the registration and orientation process. Another participant, Linda, from Brazil, temporarily brought a helper with her from her country because she needed daycare and had no family in the U.S. The benefit of this kind of fictive kin is upheld in the literature. Garcia-Reid, Reid, and Peterson (2005, p. 267) maintain that the social support of friends, teachers, and other parents correlates with family engagement and buffers or mitigates negative events that immigrants may experience.

Respect As A Critical Factor For Connectedness

This section examines how the participants view connections made between home and school. At the core of connections is positive communication that confers respect -
respect for the participant’s culture and for their unique characteristics and experiences as immigrants in the U.S.

*Personal Connections: The Communication of Warmth and Respect*

As is true with any school, a warm, welcoming teacher who demonstrates personal interest and affirms the uniqueness of each child is a strong factor that encourages families’ connection and affiliation with the school (Allen, 2007). The foundation of Freire’s philosophy of education lies in creating personal connections by facilitating positive dialogue and respect. Likewise, Moll (2010) avers that adopting a strengths/abilities based view of students and their families helps to build positive relationships between home and school. As personal relationships grow, they become the connective tissue that maintains and strengthens parents’ connections with their children’s schools.

As an example, Carmen, from Venezuela, was enthusiastic when discussing specific teachers who showed warmth and caring. Carmen described her son’s teacher from the previous year:

(My son’s) teacher doesn’t understand Spanish, but she tries. She had goodie bags, and she called parents to come in. During the summer, the teacher mailed a personal letter and pizza coupons to the kids. Let me show you the letter…

Carmen had saved the teacher’s letter for a year, suggesting that she felt connected to a teacher whose communication was consistently warm. The teacher had made the effort to bridge the language barrier, and Carmen recognized that, as indicated by her statement, “She tries.” Additionally, Carmen’s comment about Spanish revealed her own bicultural identity, an awareness of the differences in language. Although the teacher could not
understand Carmen linguistically, the effort to reach out to the family was made, and this summertime communication was the genesis of a connection between home and school. Trumbull et al. (2003) uphold the benefit of teachers’ increased personal involvement and informal interactions with Latin American families (p. 54).

When describing teachers who earned her trust or made personal connections, Rita, young mother of a first grader, used a warm voice. She said her daughter’s teacher communicated with her on a daily basis by sending home resources so Rita and Paula, her daughter, could study together. These resources were specially designed for Paula as an English Language Learner, as Rita explained, “She (the teacher) didn’t even speak Spanish, but she helped me so much. She expected Paula to work hard, and I wanted that too. She gave me books and sheets so I could help her.” This comment suggests that Rita perceived respect in the acknowledgement of her skills and competencies within these dialogic interactions. Rita’s description suggests that the teacher had reached out to make an emotive connection that was accepted and reciprocated. Parents have the prerogative to ignore such invitations to connect. In Rita’s case, however, the bond was formed through their mutual goal of helping Paula succeed academically. Reyna (2008) suggests that educators should recognize the value of at-home learning and respect it as valid family engagement.

Like Carmen, Rita’s bicultural identity appeared to heighten her awareness of teachers who cannot speak the parents’ language yet make special efforts to form connections. For Rita, this dialogue and show of respect developed into a deep sense of connection with her daughter’s two teachers, the classroom teacher and the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher. Rita’s affiliation for them appeared to be
cemented by frequent communication that addressed her daughter’s specific academic needs. The literature upholds that successful connections “invite involvement, are welcoming, and address specific parental needs” (Allen, 2007, p. 7).

Teens in the participant families also described their connection with teachers who communicated with warmth and respect. As an example, Valentina, teen daughter of Carmen (from Venezuela) explained:

My two favorite people at school were the assistant and my fourth grade teacher. I felt like I was her daughter. She wanted us to be successful. She asked me to stay after school to help her. When she moved, she gave me her email, and she would call my mom.

One might assume that teen Valentina, who appears outgoing, cheerful, and smart, had an easy time developing connections. In reality, Valentina had several difficult years according to her mother Carmen. Her mother related in an informal conversation how Valentina talked incessantly at school (in Spanish) and refused to speak English, even though she could speak some at home. Valentina’s mother, Carmen, said she believed the connection with the fourth grade teacher “who cared about her” provided what her daughter needed to be successful. Trumbull et al. (2003) maintain that teachers’ increased proximity and respectful interactions positively influence relationships between teachers and Latin American parents (p. 54).

Additionally, for Carmen, phone communication from school signified respect. Carmen smiled and her voice lifted as she described the significance of phone calls: “I was very surprised when the principal called me – for either good or bad – they have 800 kids!” Phone calls from school, even when her daughter was in trouble, seemed to
strengthen the connection between home and school because it showed the school respected and honored her role as a parent. The dialogue between school and home reinforced that Carmen was an integral part of her daughter’s education, as advocated in the literature (Epstein, 2001; Mapp, 2003; Reyna, 2008).

Carmen provided another example of personal connections made through respect and dialogue as she described her daughter’s orchestra teacher, who is also the middle school Spanish teacher. The inclusion of a picture of the orchestra on a collage suggests the significant role of the teacher for both Carmen and her daughter. Given the prompt, “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your child’s school,” mother and daughter alike described the poster. Carmen’s daughter described the teacher:

My mom … was able to talk to him, and if she ever needs help with any other teachers, he is able to help. My school would not be bothered or upset if they walked into the class and the teacher is speaking Spanish. He teaches in English, but if he sees that nobody (Spanish-speakers) got it, he would say it in Spanish.

Though not an official school liaison, the orchestra teacher appears to serve as an intermediary to connect through their common language, Spanish. His ability and willingness to communicate in Spanish in order to facilitate understanding for both students and parents suggests his respect of the families’ culture. Information is power, and intermediaries, such as the orchestra teacher, give increased power to Carmen and other parents by negotiating access to valuable school information through respect and dialogue. Furthermore, the parents are likely aware that this teacher assists students who need further academic clarification in their native language. These parents may vicariously feel the respect shown to the children by the teacher even if they do not know
him themselves. The literature confirms the importance of liaisons and interpreters, even for parents who have some English fluency (Orozco, 2008) like Carmen.

Linking Connectedness and Family Engagement

Carmen, mother of two from Venezuela, provides an apt example of a home-school connection that led to family engagement with her children’s schools on two occasions. The first occurred when Carmen had an illness for almost two years and could not travel to the school. She asked her daughter’s teacher about the possibility of Carmen participating from home. The teacher invited Carmen to translate paperwork for the other Spanish-speaking parents. The teacher emailed newsletters and school correspondence to Carmen, who translated and emailed them back to the teacher, as she described here:

Anything important, they can email it to me, and I can translate from home. I take it seriously. One time I had trouble with the Internet, and I missed an email for two days, and I felt so bad about it.

It appears that Carmen considered her volunteer role as important. Her regret for the one error was inferred by observing her voice and facial expression. The teacher connected to Carmen with a strengths/abilities based view rather than a deficit view, which appeared to heighten Carmen’s sense of self-worth. Carmen’s words, “anything important, they can email it to me” infers that she is willing to do more than newsletters, i.e. continue her engagement with the school. Carmen’s narrative and body language inferred that Carmen interpreted the teacher’s message as, *We care about you and value your skill.* Additionally, Carmen felt needed and connected, not only by the school, but also by the Latin American families for whom she was serving as liaison. This instance illustrates
how a dialogic interaction and honoring a parent’s funds of knowledge, in this case, bilingual ability (Gonzalez et al., 2005), can communicate respect and deepen the connection.

Carmen’s son’s teacher provided the second example of the use of Carmen’s skills and knowledge, once again her bilingual ability. By inviting Carmen to read in Spanish to the language arts class, the teacher demonstrated respect that led to connection and engagement. Carmen described the scenario:

I went another day to celebrate Halloween to read (my son’s) favorite book. They (the students) dressed in their favorite character. I was invited to read a few chapters of his favorite book in Spanish. His favorite book is Toy Story, and the children loved it (smiles and laughter). Since they knew the story, they could imagine it; they loved hearing it in Spanish.

Carmen’s collage included a photograph of herself reading to the class, suggesting how important this incident of engagement was to her. Her body language of smiles and laughter infer that she felt connected to her son’s school as well as satisfied for having been engaged. It also appears from the data that Carmen perceived respect for her culture and an honoring of her funds of knowledge. The ability to speak in two languages is considered by Gonzalez et al. (2005) to be a significant component of a person’s funds of knowledge. The literature supports that parents from a non-dominant culture typically desire to be involved in their children’s education (Mapp, 2003; Trumbull et al., 2003).

Events That Communicate Respect by Celebrating the Unique

When asked how the school recognizes and respects parents who are not from the U.S., the first response from three of the four participants was the celebration called
International Night. Laura called International Night “awesome” and said, “It’s the one thing I always participate in.” Laura’s response infers that communication that shows the school respects and honors cultural uniqueness has a powerful effect on her sense of connection and family engagement. The celebration seemed important to her, even though some educators view these kinds of celebrations as a mere token or beginning of a culturally responsive school environment (Allen, 2007).

Each of these three participants told in detail about the countries’ flags, costumes, dances, skits, and talent shows that occurred or were on display during the celebrations and his/her role in the production. “Great;” “It’s like a carnival; the best night ever” were representative comments during in-depth interviews. Rita, the young mother from Colombia, described in an interview the native Colombian dish she prepared for the event. She expressed enthusiasm as she explained the following:

It’s a chance to show the faculty that there are many kinds of different foods and that the cultures are different in many ways, and they really appreciated it… most parents hand sew their costumes and the food is always home cooked.

The intensity of Rita’s expression suggested an increase in her sense of self-worth as a result of this dialogic interaction with the school; it appears she believed the faculty respected her for the demonstration of her competencies. Additionally, her excerpt implies that it is important for her to communicate to the school that Latin Americans are not all alike. Rita included a depiction of the hand-sewn costume on her collage of Colombia, suggesting the importance she attaches to her role as a cultural dancer in her home country. Her body language (smile) and voice suggested a positive connection with the school that reinforced her engagement in the activity. Rita further revealed her
thoughts through a collage where she articulated her vision of an ideal school environment. When given the prompt, “Create a collage that represents, in a perfect world, what your relationship with your child’s school would be, Rita wrote these words on her poster:

I think that the perfect school could be possible if we work in a project that could help the students and their families to know and share their knowledgements (sic) of every culture of the countries that inhabit this Nation, with different activities that give an incentive to each student and their families to meet each other. My idea is to make an activity maybe monthly, or every two months with the students and their families…to show everything about their countries to other students and their families.

The poster depicts adults of various ethnicities in active movement, with one dancing and one playing a musical instrument. The collage also includes a picture of three children with “thought bubbles” above their heads, which suggests that they are thinking. The collage implies that an ideal school for Rita is one that values connectedness and shared knowledge about the distinctiveness of each family’s funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Fuller and Coll (2010) maintain that it is important for educators to honor and recognize that cultural practices vary among different Latin American communities and countries (p. 560), and teachers are called to be cultural workers who discover and share the unique funds of knowledge of each family (Allen, 2007; Freire, 1998/2005; Moll, 2010).

All four participants of the present study mentioned the desire for school personnel to recognize the uniqueness of each country’s history and culture. Because the
majority of Latin Americans in the participants’ schools are from Mexico, all four participants said in informal conversations that they are pleased when teachers or school employees recognize that Latin America has many unique countries. The data suggests that when this happens, such as during cultural celebrations, the families feel connected and engaged. Nieto (2008) maintains that in Freire’s lifetime, he never used the term “multicultural education,” yet his life was dedicated to the communication of respect and the recognition of multicultural uniqueness, making his work “profoundly multicultural” (p.2). Similarly, discovering and valuing what is distinctive about culturally and linguistically diverse families is the heart of the funds of knowledge concept (Gonzalez et al., 2005). It is important to note that the funds of knowledge concept stresses that the cultural practices of Latin American families should be “incorporated strategically into classrooms,” not merely used as “folkloric displays” (Gonzalez et al., p. 187).

Linda, Brazilian mother of two teen daughters, suggested caution about the reliance on a school’s cultural displays to indicate respect for cultures:

International Night is only for one day. … Sometimes the teachers here need to pay more attention to students from other cultures who have moved here and understand what they have gone through. … In general they (teachers) care, but they don’t think about the difference in cultures that they have. They (immigrant students) are just coming from another country. Here are poor people coming to a big, beautiful school and they don’t speak English. You don’t know how they are feeling.

Linda’s comments infer a yearning for closer connections between home and school as well as a desire for respect for the immigrant experience. Linda had revealed in
conversations that her adjustment to the U.S. was made more difficult by the loss of her husband. In this excerpt, it appears she was speaking for herself, as well as for other immigrants, when she said, “You don’t know how they are feeling.” Further, her comments suggest that teachers need to respect cultural differences on a day-to-day basis as a basic tenet of pedagogy. Respect for the experiences and context of a learner’s situation is advised in the literature (Freire, 1996; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Oughton, 2010).

*Dialogue in Symbols: A Visual Welcome Mat*

The participants’ sense of connection to the school was sometimes expressed through a metaphor. Since communication includes nonverbal signifiers in addition to spoken language, one participant’s use of the metaphor, flags in the school building, was a revealing look how symbols can communicate. Laura, mother of two sons from Brazil, described her first encounter with her son’s high school: “When I came inside the high school it was welcoming. There were flags all over the ceiling. Every flag was for a different country. I liked that.” In separate interviews, Laura twice mentioned the flags that hung at her son’s school, indicating their importance to her connection with the school. It appears she viewed the flags as a visual welcome mat, a valuing of the diversity that existed within. In Allen’s (2007) discussion of how to create positive dialogue throughout the year, she refers to nonverbal symbols that either include or exclude in addition to spoken words.

For Laura and her son, it seems the flags were much more than decoration; they communicated, *We are interested in you, and you belong here*. Laura’s son, Lucas, included flags on his collage as well. When given the prompt, “Create a collage that represents, in a perfect world, what your relationship with your child’s school would be,”
Laura made a poster that included flags of many nations hanging like clothes on a line over the school. A banner at the front door reads, “Welcome,” and the windows are open. The faint rainbow over the school and abundance of green grass at the bottom seems to reinforce a sense of hope that Laura pictures in a “perfect world.”

Laura’s collage appears symmetrical and harmonious. The colors are muted, and the flags appear to wave in a breeze, indicating a peaceful environment. For both Laura and Lucas, her son, the flags seemed to be a metaphoric dialogue of respect. Laura’s suggested vision of the future reflects the hope for equity that hallmarked the career of Freire (Nieto, 2008) and also implies harmony, which is considered paramount in high context cultures (Hall, 1966; Noel, 2000).

Facilitating Communication to Increase Connections

The presence of a school staff person who can communicate in a family’s language shows respect for culturally and linguistically diverse families. Additionally, it highlights the value the district places on facilitating the communication so that connections can be made. For parents who are still mastering English, the school’s use of interpreters is essential for parents to even partake in dialogue between home and school.

Even though all of the participants of this study speak English now, two of the participants, Rita (from Colombia) and Carmen (from Venezuela), expressed great concern that budget cuts would force schools to reduce interpretation services for other immigrants, reflecting their collectivist rather than individualistic worldview (Noel, 2000). These participants indicated that they felt relief and appreciation themselves for a person in the building who spoke their language when they first arrived. As Carmen emphasized during an in-depth interview, “Everything was new for us.” Carmen’s remark
paints a picture of a new immigrant thrust into a land with a new language and suggests
the importance of liaisons and interpreters to initiate connections between home and
school. The literature upholds the important role of interpreters and liaisons (Harry, 2008;
Howland et al., 2006).

Carmen, mother of two from Venezuela, provided the following example of
dialogue that helps her stay engaged with her children’s education. Even though Carmen
speaks and understands English, she often relies on interpretation to fully comprehend
pertinent school news and to understand the labyrinth of information present in U.S.
schools. She explained, “I have a friend in the office who calls me all the time. I knew
her though (a community program), but she’s the secretary. She calls all the Hispanic
parents.” Carmen’s quote infers her strong connections with her cultural group as well as
with the secretary, who represents the school. Carmen’s connection with the school by
way of the secretary indicates respect for Carmen’s culture. Her experience is
corroborated in the literature. The literature reveals (Bernhard & Freire, 1999), and the
transition center’s liaison verified, that unresolved differences in language, including
school terminology, often present a barrier to family engagement with the school. As
shown by focus group studies in Indianapolis, Indiana, school liaisons who have life
experiences similar to families and who know and understand the needs of the
community are the most effective in interpreting the system and forging positive
relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Howland et al., 2006).

Likewise, Rita mother of one, from Colombia, stressed the importance of the school’s
interpreter to facilitate dialogue when she avowed, “It’s very important that she’s in the
front.” The interpreter’s office had been established at the front of the school during the
year. The move appears to be an important signifier for Rita as she considered herself and other families who needed interpretative services. Rita’s connection to her child’s school is explained here as she refers to the school liaison, who represents the school:

The person who helps the Hispanic families at school lets us know what we can do (to help my child). When I need to say something that I couldn’t explain in English, I call her. If there was something I didn’t understand, I call her.

In Rita’s case, the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and her daughter’s first grade teacher also provide a close connection as liaisons even though they do not speak her language. As suggested through their statements and collages, both Rita and Carmen recognized the school was facilitating access to engagement by providing connections through a liaison, interpreter, or a secretary who served as fictive kin. The literature shows that culturally and linguistically diverse families find school liaisons beneficial in forging home-school connections and increasing family engagement (Howland et al., 2006).

Facilitating the Dialogue for Children

The children of three of the four participants utilized ESOL, and all four families said they felt valued by the school having a strong ESOL program. When probed, they said this shows the school understands that teaching English provides English Language Learners a chance to be successful and shows respect for immigrants as a group. This response highlights the connection the Latin American participants appear to feel for others in their culture and also reflects the social justice aspect of critical theory. By providing the liberating tool, that is, mastery of English, the school presents opportunity
for forging connections and providing success for the non-dominant culture (Freire, 1968/2000).

Rita, from Colombia, provides an example of the importance of ESOL for her first grade daughter, Paula:

The (ESOL) teacher was wonderful to both Paula and me. She would tell me, “Paula is doing well, but please help her with this,” or “Please have Paula watch television shows in English.” She really cared about Paula and about me. Not just for English…She knew I couldn’t drive, so she sent the work and notes home.”

Rita’s excerpt suggests that the home-school connection provided an opportunity for Rita to be engaged with her child’s education on a regular basis. She is able to engage with the teacher to help her daughter learn the language of the dominant society in which she lives, thus paving the way for equity for Paula (Freire, 1968/2000). The literature upholds the benefit of personal contact by the school that supports family engagement through in-home learning such as illustrated by Rita’s situation (Epstein, 2001; Mapp, 2003; Reyna, 2008).

The teens who participated in the study indicated that ESOL teachers are essential for transition for new immigrants, and the connections that are formed appeared to be substantial. For example, Carmen’s daughter, Valentina (from Venezuela) boasted, “My first grade ESOL teacher – now, every time she comes into town she tries to find me,” which suggests an unusual connection that is deeper than most teacher-student relationships. Another teen, Laura’s son, Lucas, from Brazil, included an image of ESOL on his collage even though he did not require the service. He asserted during an in-depth interview, “The ESOL teachers are great, and they really celebrate diversity. I have so
many friends from Brazil who take ESOL, and it’s important.” Lucas’ comment suggests that, through an intermediary program - ESOL - connection with one group (other Latin Americans) may be transferred to a sense of connection with the school. The program provides the tools for access to dialogue, and therefore connections between cultures, and Lucas appears to have recognized that. Fuller and Coll (2010) report that becoming “biculturally agile” appears to benefit the cognitive and social development of Latin American children and adolescents (p. 563).

While none of the participants’ schools offered bilingual education, ESOL teachers served as intermediaries and provided an important conduit for successfully learning English, thus facilitating the dialogue between home and school. Linda, mother of two daughters from Brazil, concurred that ESOL is “a great thing that makes me admire the U.S. schools. In Brazil, we don’t have that for other cultures. Here, it’s part of your recognition for the diversity you have.” This quote suggests that in Linda’s eyes, recognizing the diversity of other immigrant groups brings respect to all cultures. Thus, it appears from the parents’ perspective that the ESOL teachers served as facilitators for dialogue, conferred respect for the families, and formed connections with the program and, therefore, the school.

Summary

This chapter addressed the first research question and associated sub questions, which are: How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?

a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

Through a portraiture of the participants that highlighted their experiences and funds of knowledge, the importance of connectedness for Latin American families as members of a high context culture was revealed. I then explored the participants’ sense of connectedness with their child’s school and factors that contributed to their perspectives.

The findings in this chapter indicate that relationships do matter. As parents and teens described teachers and other school staff who personally partnered with them, the descriptions seemed to go beyond the academic to an emotional sense of connectedness with the school. These findings are in accord with and extend research that upholds the importance of building partnerships between home and school (Allen, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp, 2003; Moll, 2010; Trumbull et al., 2003). Respect is a critical factor; it appears that when families perceive they are connected to their child’s school in ways that respect their knowledge, skills, and competencies, i.e. their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al.), their sense of connectedness with the school is strengthened.

Further, these findings suggest that a sense of connectedness provides the foundation for family engagement with the school. The participants narrated numerous illustrations of the preceding assertions, such as, classroom newsletter translation (Carmen); ongoing school/home communication and support for home learning (Rita); participation in cultural celebrations (all participants); and presentations to the faculty (Rita). Among these illustrations of family engagement, the common factors are the parents’ sense of connectedness with the school and the school’s apparent demonstration
of respect through a strengths/abilities based ideology in the school/home dialogue (Freire, 1998/2005).

The findings in this chapter, however, also foreshadow that tensions may exist in some interactions between home and school. This is suggested by Linda’s comment, “In general they (teachers) care, but they don’t think about the difference in cultures that they (immigrants) have. … You don’t know how they (immigrants) are feeling.” Since the literature reveals that Latin American families “often find the school environment unwelcoming or discouraging” (Shah, 2009, p. 218; Turney & Kao, 2009), the current critical study must also probe the families’ perspectives to discover areas of needed school improvement. Thus, in the next chapter, I will examine tensions that impede the development of connectedness and family engagement with the school for the participants of the present study.
CHAPTER 5
TENSIONS THAT IMPEDE THE DEVELOPMENT OF
CONNECTEDNESS AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SCHOOL

Introduction

In chapter four, I investigated how the participants viewed their school’s efforts to make connections with them and what experiences and factors encouraged the development of connectedness and family engagement with schools. The findings of the study suggest that a sense of connectedness lays the foundation for family engagement. Importantly, I argued that respect and dialogue (Freire, 1998/2005) are critical factors for establishing connections and family engagement with schools. These assertions coalesce with studies of Henderson and Mapp (2002) and Mapp (2003), who conclude that home-school relationships built on trust and family strengths encourage family engagement with the school. Additionally, Shah (2009) maintains that how families feel about their child’s school influences their degree of family engagement. Therefore, in this chapter, the second research question and associated sub questions are explored:

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?

   a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?

   b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?
In this chapter, the argument is made that communication is also at the core of tensions that impede the development of connectedness and family engagement for culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, conveys meaning, whether intentional or not. The receiver of the communication attaches meaning to what he/she perceives by linking it to life experiences and his/her worldview. Since school is a complex and dynamic institution, the tensions discussed in this chapter may be perceived through activities that are purposely planned, such as PTA or parent volunteer situations; qualities that exist, such as the absence of interpreters; or interactions between individuals at school, such as an unwelcoming or dismissive voice or disdainful facial expression by a person of authority.

Communication holds more consequence if the initiating party is perceived as an authority (Martin and Nakayama, 2004). Approval and connectedness are especially important when the interaction is with those considered the *experts*, as many from the non-dominant culture perceive school personnel to be (Freire, 1998/2005). For this reason, Freire spoke often of the importance of positive dialogic interaction between people in a position of power and those who are not – typically people from the non-dominant culture. He advised teachers to continually self-reflect about their positions of perceived authority and to communicate with humility (1998/2005), and he averred, “Humility helps us to understand this obvious truth: no one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything” (p. 39). Like Freire (1998/2005), Moll and his colleagues offer educators a means to establish positive communication by examining and valuing the strengths of families, such as their skills, competencies, and knowledge accumulated
through life experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2005). The theories of both Moll and Freire require that home-school connections be made through a communication of respect.

In the eyes of the participants, dialogue initiated by the school can be positive, as seen through examples in the previous chapter, or it can cause lack of clarity for the family or devalue them or their culture, creating tensions that impede the development of connectedness and family engagement with schools. Dialogue that devalues, either subtly or overtly, conveys a meaning that diminishes someone’s importance. For instance, a demeaning look, a dismissive attitude, or a cursory response given by a school staff person to a parent can be perceived as a denial of that parent’s worth. Such negative body language has the power to alienate other individuals, thus breaking connections between home and school. Communication that minimizes another human is considered by some to be subtle oppression (Freire, 1996; Yosso, 2005). This subtle oppression may occur in the school environment even for individuals like the participants of the current study, who are educated, who value education, and who are familiar with schooling.

Even mere differences in cultural styles between humans can lead to tensions. For example, though individuals vary, the communication style of those from a high context culture, such as Latin America, is generally warm and open (Hall, 1966; Noel, 2000). There is a reliance on nonverbal cues, and the emotional context is as important, or even more, than the words spoken. For the Latin American culture, in general, it is important that words are efficient but that they foster harmony (Noel, p.16). In contrast, the U.S. culture typically relies less on contextual cues, and more on extended talk and factual knowledge (Martin & Nakayama, 2004; Noel). Misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and worse, blatant discrimination and poor educational decisions can occur because of
these differences in style and assumptions made by decision makers who have power over those who are different from them. For example, if a Latin American parent perceives the personnel at her child’s school to be abrupt, uncaring, or prejudiced against Latin Americans, the parent will likely avoid going to the school, which reinforces the school staff person’s possible assumption that Latin American parents do not care about education. While U.S. schools typically represent the institution of power for most parents, this is particularly true for Latin American families who left their country for the purpose of their child’s education. Thus, it is through a critical lens that power differentials and tensions between dominant and non-dominant cultures will be examined using events, scenarios, and vignettes.

Communication of Disrespect: A Devaluing of Cultures

“Just Like That - They Were Gone”

Communication, whether verbal, nonverbal, or symbolic has the ability to cause people to feel valued or devalued (Freire, 1998/2005; Martin & Nakayama, 2004). To illustrate this, we begin with a story of symbolic communication as related by Laura, the Brazilian mother of Lucas, during an in-depth interview. Lucas is a high school senior, but the story’s history began when Lucas was a freshman.

In two separate interviews, Laura described her initial impression as she and her son entered the high school building for the first time: “Lucas’ first principal had international flags all over all the ceilings. There were flags everywhere.” Laura’s voice sounded warm both times she recalled the scene. The flags, which seemed to symbolize a welcoming philosophy for the school’s many cultures, continued to hang in the building for the next two years.
When a new principal was hired just before Lucas’ junior year, the flags were removed. Laura’s voice seemed to become stern, and her words were brief and direct as she described what happened: “(The) second principal took them (the flags) all down. … Just like that - they were gone!”

Laura’s words and voice infer that she felt snubbed and rejected when the new administrator took down the school’s international flags, which had been personal to her the years before. It seems she saw the removal as a symbolic, unwelcoming gesture – an act of disrespect by someone in authority. With the perceived devaluing of Laura’s culture, her connection with the school appeared to be diminished, as evidenced by her tone of voice and body language. When probed to find the reason why the flags were removed, Laura said she did not know and did not ask. Laura possibly interpreted this flag removal as a slight to her culture – a devaluing of her Brazilian identity.

Generally, people in most countries feel affiliation for their country’s flag and attach various meanings to the visual symbol. For most, flags represent home. The emotional attachment to Laura’s home country is suggested by her collage, which she created for the prompt, “Create a collage that will make me feel like I am back in your country.” The poster she made has many of the elements of the Brazilian flag. Her poster has the same green field, blue sphere, and yellow rhombus in the same color shades as the flag. Laura described the yellow chips and blue flakes on the collage:

The yellow is for beauty and for gold and is hope for the future. We don’t have gold anymore. We used to have a lot of gold, but the Portuguese stole it. Blue is the ocean; it’s mosaic because it’s not so clean like before. Lots of bottles in it, we call “plastic pets”…There’s so much detergent that you can see bubbles. It’s
beautiful, but we know it’s bad pollution.

As our discussion of her collage continued, Laura’s voice became assertive and somewhat emotional as she described the depicted wildlife throughout the poster and the combination of natural resources with symbols of those who have taken advantage of the country. Her description inferred a nostalgic connection to her home country coupled with sadness about the country’s imperfections and its history.

As Laura described her collage, it seemed she attached emotive meanings to symbolic representations, such as the gold and blue mosaics. Thus, the removal of international flags from her son’s school could have been perceived by her as much more than a physical act. Perhaps the flags were worn or outdated, but no replacement was made. Perhaps a school announcement was made or a letter of explanation sent and the family missed it. However, this incident represents a missed opportunity for dialogue between home and school, between dominant and non-dominant families (Freire, 1968/2000). If the administrators had assured that clear communication between school and home was received before the flags were removed, the tensions may have been alleviated or prevented.

Laura’s perceptions of the event demonstrate how the destruction of something that is symbolically and culturally meaningful can cause tensions and possibly break connections between home and school. It can be examined in terms of assertions by Freire (1996), Noel (2000), and Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) that culturally and linguistically diverse families often view their role as supportive and perceive the school’s role as the clearly defined expert. Culturally and linguistically diverse parents are often hesitant to challenge administrative decisions they view as the school’s domain
(Arias & Morillo-Campbell, p. 10), yet they often experience incidents of “rebuff” (Auerbach, 2002, p. 1379). Freire asserted that those from a non-dominant group often participate in the inequity with their reluctance to open up the channels of communication. The result is the missed opportunity for dialogue between school and home, and the perceived tension may impede the opportunity for future, deeper family engagement.

“What Part of Mexico is Venezuela?”

Diminishing the culture of another can happen whenever people from two different cultures interact, and it can be perceived as demeaning, as will be illustrated. Carmen, the mother of two from Venezuela, is no stranger to being stereotyped. Stereotyping occurs when people make assumptions about others based on preconceived ideas, as illustrated by Carmen in the following excerpt:

In the children’s school, I don’t like it when people (other adults) say, “What part of Mexico is Venezuela?” I say, “I am an American.” They say, “No,” but I say, “Yes, I am. I am South American. You are North American, and I am South American.”

Carmen thus expressed her dissatisfaction with assumptions made by those who consider Latin Americans monolithically, i.e. from Mexico. It appears Carmen perceived a lack of respect for her unique Venezuelan heritage and that her own culture was discounted or devalued in the verbal interaction. She seems to be asking for respect but was not afforded it. This excerpt also illustrates Carmen’s efforts to clarify her own identity vis-à-vis the tendency of those in the U.S. to consider the word, American, to only mean North American. Her words and firm tone of voice suggest she perceived both
ethnocentrism and stereotyping by the other adults in these exchanges. Stereotyping can feel especially devaluing when the person being stereotyped represents a culture that is often considered negatively (Trueba & McLaren, 2000). Currently, adults of Mexican heritage comprise the largest proportion of the Latin American population in the U.S. and also have the lowest educational attainment among Latin American subgroups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2009), factors that likely have contributed to anti-immigrant sentiment and stereotyping. Ormrod (2008) maintains that when people are aware that an unflattering stereotype exists about their own group, “worrisome thoughts intrude” (p. 482), and the literature upholds the importance of respecting the diversity of various Latin American groups (Fuller & Coll, 2010).

The previous encounters described by Laura and Carmen illustrate some tensions that have the potential to impede their sense of connection with the school. They both appeared to perceive stereotyping, neglect, or denial of their rich cultures. Both women have extensive knowledge about South American history and culture, which was revealed during the in-depth biographical interviews. Their knowledge, which could be a valuable resource for the school, was deep. Also deep seemed to be their feeling of being devalued. Freire (1998/2005) warned educators against making decisions that devalue those who are different in this message:

> We have a strong tendency to affirm that what is different from us is inferior. We start from the belief that our way of being is not only good but better than that of others who are different from us. This is intolerance. (pp. 127-128)

A teacher using a funds of knowledge approach might invite parents with deep expertise to share their knowledge as part of classroom instruction (Copland & Knapp, 2006;
Gonzalez et al., 2005), thus generating a dialogue of respect rather than spawning negative feelings toward the school (Freire, p. 73).

First (And Lasting) Impressions

Seen through the eyes of a new immigrant, disrespectful or unwelcoming communication by a school official carries great import (Nieto, 2006). Yet, three of four participants have had negative encounters with school personnel, and with clarity, they recalled these encounters as devaluing. Laura, from Brazil, provides an example. When Laura first arrived in the U.S., she had vaccination paperwork in hand for her son, Lucas. However, she was rebuffed by the middle school nurse, who insisted Lucas needed to be re-immunized. Laura’s description of the encounter was visceral as she recounted:

The nurse seemed to me big and mean…She told me, “They aren’t (the current state’s) shots.” And then, rudely, “This boy needs glasses.” I had insurance, but Lucas did not, so I had to go to a doctor, and it was expensive. I was afraid; I didn’t know what would be in the shot, just like you would be afraid of a shot if you went to another country. They wanted other documents from Brazil, but they didn’t have a translator (for Portuguese), so why did they want it? … even though I had it– they couldn’t read it. The interpreters weren’t helpful … they assume you understand Spanish. … If you speak with an accent, everyone assumes you are all alike and that you are from Mexico.

Recalling the event appeared to stimulate Laura’s need to describe the scene with a passionate voice during the interview. Laura’s negative feelings about the encounter seemed vivid even four years after this incident. The excerpt reveals that Laura was fearful, and she perceived the nurse, i.e. the person with power, as “big and mean.” The
nurse represented an authority, and it seems Laura felt she had no choice other than to comply with the nurse’s directions. It is possible that a Spanish interpreter was available, and although Laura speaks English, the paperwork was in Portuguese, so her uniqueness and her needs were ignored, showing a lack of respect for her culture. Laura appeared to perceive she was being stereotyped once again. Her comment suggests she was offended by the idea that others assume she is from Mexico rather than Brazil, a country with its own language and cultural history.

One wonders about the urgency of completing the school registration in this case. Could the school have provided translation of the Portuguese documents at a later date? Could someone have suggested a visit to the health department to save the expenditure? If the nurse had initiated a dialogue of respect, Laura’s fears and negative perceptions may have been alleviated. Instead, through Laura’s eyes, the nurse seemed to imply Laura was not a good caregiver by not having glasses for her son or the “right” shots.

Laura’s artistic drawings further illustrate her feelings about this occurrence at her son’s middle school. Following the prompt, “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your child’s school,” Laura constructed two posters, one depicting Lucas’ school in Brazil, and the other, his school in the U.S. In the Brazilian drawing, a large tree in front of the school dominates the poster, and children in school uniforms are lined up in the tree’s shade. There is a dog by the school’s entrance, looking alert and happy. The teacher faces the children looking as if she will speak to them momentarily. The sky is blue, and the tree is full of green branches.
By contrast, the sky in the drawing depicting the U.S. school shows rain clouds with lightning bolts pointing toward the school. Laura clarified the meaning of her drawing during the interview:

The first time I saw my son’s (middle) school, it looked like a prison. The building was big, and everything was gray, and I had so many fears. I was very worried about coming to a foreign country.

In interviews, Laura discussed these worries she had about coming to the U.S. In addition to the fear of her son being bullied, Laura’s fears included descriptions she had heard about U.S. schools before her arrival regarding unhealthy school food, as she described here: “In Brazil, he would come home for lunch and I’d feed him healthy food. In Brazil, snacks are light and healthy. Here, there’s too much fried foods. I worried about this.”

It appears Laura is a woman who had carefully planned her move to the U.S., taking into account all the risks she perceived. For example, she had enrolled her son in an intensive English course in Brazil and researched to find the best U.S. school for her son’s needs. Concerned that her son would gain weight, she first visited the school kitchen and read the menus. Therefore, after all her careful planning, the encounter with school nurse, as described above, seemed especially brutal. Instead of an opportunity for connection and possible engagement with the school, she perceived disrespect and stereotyping by someone in a position of power. When asked to describe the school, she depicted it as a prison. Both Freire (1998/2005) and Moll (2010) remind us that positive dialogue requires the utmost respect for others. Respect for those in authority at their children’s schools is a cultural mindset Latin American immigrants typically bring with them to the
U.S. (Trumbull et al., 2003), yet new immigrants are frequently faced with negative assumptions made by school personnel (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

In addition to the tensions Laura felt during the encounter with the middle school nurse, she seemed to perceive a prevailing atmosphere of disrespect in the high school’s front office. She did not describe a single event, but an environment that she sensed each time she visited the school. Laura depicted one staff person in particular: “She looked at me like I was…I don’t know what. … At first, I didn’t want to go there.” As Laura first began her description, I witnessed her demeanor as intense. Her demeanor became tempered, and she seemed to be making connections and understandings with this experience as she spoke:

They don’t make you feel warm, especially when you don’t speak good English. Bad humor. They seem disconnected from the rest of the school. I thought it was because of my English, but they never got nice. They were always rude to me … You want immigrants to feel warm…Once you got past that frontier though, the teachers were nice. I have a lot of praise for the teachers.

What Laura was describing here is different from a mere offhand or dismissive attitude by the office staff. It seems Laura interpreted the staff person’s “look” as disrespectful and ill-mannered. At the end of the retelling, Laura’s voice was positive and uplifted; the retelling appeared to have provided an emotional release. It seemed that relating the story helped her to organize her thoughts internally and, in the process, to construct new meaning from this experience.

Laura’s comment that the office staff was always rude “to me” suggests that she felt personally affronted. She did not merely say, “They were always rude,” which would
imply that they were rude to everyone. Additionally, by saying, “You want immigrants to feel warm,” she appears to want to be welcomed, to feel connected, to feel affiliated to her son’s school. Laura’s comment, “They never got nice” infers that the office staff literally and figuratively represented a continual barrier, a “frontier,” that “you must get past” in order to connect with the teachers. It seems Laura’s degree of connectedness with her son’s school is confounded by hurtful remarks made by people she sees as gatekeepers to the institution. With their ability to undermine school connection for Laura, and for other immigrants, these gatekeepers thus wield immense power in Laura’s son’s school. The literature supports that the barrier of power inequities is detrimental to making connections and initiating a dialogue of respect (Allen, 2007; Freire, 1996).

Rita, 27, and mother of one, from Colombia, likewise perceived disrespect conveyed by a school representative during her first contact with her daughter’s school. When Rita came to register her daughter for school, she witnessed a staff member make a face in her direction, as she recalled here:

She (the staff member) made a face as if to say, ‘I don’t want you to be here.” She didn’t ask if I needed an interpreter. I always feel comfortable with my English, but she didn’t offer. … Yes, there was a liaison in the building. (Later) the teacher did ask if I needed an interpreter.

Rita continued, “Sometimes the Hispanics feel they (school staff) don’t want to pay attention to us.” It is interesting to note that, among the participants, Rita is a particularly intuitive and sensitive woman with a quiet demeanor. Whether or not Rita’s interpretations were correct, it seems Rita believed that she, and others in her culture,
were not afforded full respect. Her quote suggests she yearns to be respected, “paid attention to,” and regarded with esteem instead of disdain.

Interestingly, Auerbach (2002) writes of a Latin American mother who complained that the school counselor “was not paying enough attention” to her daughter (p. 1379). The mother in Auerbach’s study recalled “defending her child against a demeaning counselor who did not show proper respect” (p. 1380). Auerbach conjectures that this mother is like many parents of the non-dominant culture who “seek a level of … attention and personal relationships that are incompatible with bureaucratic school structures and dominant cultural conceptions” (p. 1380).

As revealed later in an informal conversation, Rita’s frame of reference was possibly influenced by two perceived anti-immigrant episodes that happened in the public arena around the same time as the school incident, one involving someone pushing her father’s shopping cart, as described here:

We were in (a discount department store) and an American grabbed our cart and pushed our cart and said in a voice, “Thanks for taking so long, (ethnic epithet).” Another time, at (a local Latin American restaurant), my friend from my town (in Colombia) and I were so happy. All Colombians like to go places. They were playing (live) music from my town in Colombia. We were clapping and singing to the music and the other Americans at a table were looking at us like were weird. They said something bad to us and picked up their things and moved to another table.
Rita expressed how surprised she was about these public encounters: “Before Latins come here, they don’t know about the racism. In my country, I don’t feel this. Everyone is the same. In Colombia, we like Americans, so we treat Americans special.”

Rita’s comment about racism is critically significant. It suggests that she knows what racism is, can recognize it, has experienced it in the U.S., and has known others who have experienced it as well. She came to the U.S. unacquainted with the visceral impact of racial or ethnic prejudice and expected to be treated the way she said Americans were treated in her country, i.e. special. Because she cares about the school, it seems she assumed the school personnel, as representatives of a major institution of power, would show care and respect toward her.

Rita’s apparent feelings about the school office experience contrasts with the positive connections she had with her daughter’s teachers, as described in this example:

They were very interested in helping Paula learn – BOTH teachers. Not just with English, but in math, reading, everything. … Her teacher was always telling me what to do – giving me things to do with her, different and extra from what they did at school. … The teacher sent homework and told me what to do to help her with the counting. If I need books to help her to read, she gave me some sheets from her books so I could help her too. The teacher was strict but I liked that.

Rita’s description of Paula’s two teachers portrays educators who practice an ideology of respect and ongoing dialogue with parents. By showing they trust Rita to correctly reinforce Paula’s education at home, they demonstrate a strengths/abilities based view of the family. Thus, despite this negative first encounter, it appears Rita still felt connected to the school. Because of her relationship with her daughter’s teachers, Rita is likely to
continue to be engaged with her daughter’s school. The literature supports that a child’s teacher usually exerts the most influence in the school/parent connection (Olivos, 2009). However, it is the school’s responsibility to confer respect and build positive connections. The description of Rita’s experience with the non-teacher staff gives insight to what is faced regularly by those who are not from the dominant culture, and highlights the power differentials that exist between those in authority (school staff) and those who are not (Freire, 1968/2000).

Tensions Among Parents: Decision Making Groups

*Tensions Within Parent Volunteer Activities*

Sometimes, unwelcoming communication and discrimination comes from other parents at school events and can be even more hurtful if the school personnel present fail to buffer the situation. Rita, 27, from Colombia, provided an example. Rita thought she had made a friendly connection with another mother from the U.S. through slumber parties for their daughters, but was then ignored, as she described here:

> It was Field Day and a (Latin American) friend invited me to go. She and I were the only Latinos there. We wanted to help, but the other moms ignored us. We started to go with our kids to take pictures, but it wasn’t nice that day because another (white) mother acted like she didn’t know me. She was nice to me before (privately at our slumber party), but that day she didn’t greet me or introduce me to her friends. I don’t care…I shouldn’t care.

As suggested by her body language, Rita’s perceived outsider status seemed to distress her, and her last line in the excerpt infers she was indeed hurt by the experience. Her comment, “I shouldn’t care,” suggests she likely cared a great deal. Being rejected by
the white parent was even more devaluing to Rita because she wished she “could have been invited to help plan” the event, as she continued her description here:

Music unites Latinos. We like to celebrate, and we know many games…that day, we saw the kids were not so interested in the games. If the teachers and the American parents had asked us to help plan, we could have helped.

What Rita seems to be saying in this excerpt is that her competencies and skills were not tapped for a school activity, and the sense of exclusion was exacerbated by the fact that she was left out of the planning. As an “outsider,” Rita had no decision making power for an activity that could have enabled her to feel connected and to be engaged, not only with the activity, but with her child’s school and with other parents. Nonverbal messages can be powerful, especially when perceived by parents from Latin America, where warmth and intuition are key descriptors (Noel, 2000). Martin and Nakayama (2004) aver that, either subtly or overtly, dominant groups (such as the white parents in this example) work to maintain their “positions of privilege” (p. 102).

Most of the participants described similar experiences in which they attended school parent group activities but felt unneeded because the parents from the U.S. “had it under control,” a term used by Linda, the Brazilian mother of two older daughters. The interaction between the Latin American participants and the parents from the U.S. illustrates not only communication differences between cultures but also the subtle ways in which those from the dominant culture can perpetuate their advantage or control (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Linda provided an example:

I went once to orchestra booster club – the first meeting. I’d like to do something, but I felt like there was no room for me, so I didn’t stay. If I feel like I’m not
needed, I don’t go. American parents who had time were active. I offered to help, but they never called me back. I worked the (sports) snack bar a few times.

There’s always someone who wants to take charge and be the boss, take over. This lady took over. Another (Latin) mom I knew said let her do it…I’m always offering, but they don’t call. I know they just don’t need me.

What Linda seems to be imparting here is her disappointment because her daughters were involved in those two activities. She works long hours and is a single mother, and although she had arranged time to volunteer, she ultimately felt unneeded and unwanted. Even with this rejection, Linda continued to offer her volunteer services, but her offer continued to be ignored by the other parents. Linda says she is willing to volunteer, yet she also says she will not go if she feels unneeded. The last comment, “I’m always offering” was stated in the present tense, inferring that she still holds hope to be called. However, although she likely will engage if called, it seems she will no longer initiate the engagement. We are reminded that Linda volunteers weekly at an English language program, which demonstrates her knowledge, competencies, and skills as well as her willingness to donate time for others. The literature upholds that parents feel valued and needed when their families’ funds of knowledge are honored (Allen, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2005). Marginalization occurs when parents are shunned by others who have more perceived power (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1968/2000).

**Tensions Within Other Decision Making Groups**

With current school reform efforts, many U.S. schools are seeking to increase opportunities for parents to participate in school decision making activities (Copland & Knapp, 2006). School councils, school forums, and PTAs are some typical avenues for
family engagement. Two participants of the current study, Linda and Carmen, initiated a conversation about PTA at their children’s school, and both spoke of PTA meetings in terms of parental interactions at the meetings. A subtle tension is inferred in this example provided by Linda, mother of two from Brazil:

I really admire the American parents. We didn’t have PTA in Brazil, so I wasn’t used to it. But they didn’t need me. The American parents there (at PTA) are very assertive and organized and have it all under control. They take it very seriously.

This excerpt about the parent group is similar to other comments made by Linda during the study, in which she referred to the U.S. parents’ style of managing a parent activity and “taking things seriously.” As in the excerpt above, Linda talked about her “admiration” for the U.S. parents during her in-depth biographical interview: “I admire a lot of things they have here; parents here are more upfront and involved.” The wording of Linda’s comments and the repetition of this theme infer that, in some ways, Linda views herself as separate from U.S. parents at school activities. Because Linda perceived that she was not needed, there was no avenue for connection to the school program or to the other parents. Further, Linda’s perspective regarding PTA was likely influenced by her experience in Brazil, where PTA did not exist in her daughters’ schools. In Linda’s perception, the organization did not need her, and she implies she did not need it.

It cannot be assumed that Linda would like to be involved in school organizations such as PTA. It is possible she would not have shown an interest in joining even if she had felt needed by the group. However, her comments infer that she recognized a communication style among the U.S. parents that differed from hers. Martin and Nakayama (2004) argue that a common characteristic of the U.S. culture is the preferred
activity of “doing” (p. 92). The authors maintain that this “doing” orientation emphasizes productivity, as perhaps one can imagine takes place during U.S. parent volunteer activities and other parental school meetings. In general, individuals with a “doing” orientation tend to favor direct forms of communication and overt conflict resolution, which may contrast with a less direct orientation style of those from collectivist cultures (p. 91-92).

Another example of perceived tensions within parental decision making groups is provided by Carmen’s family. Carmen’s teen daughter (from Venezuela) revealed in an in-depth interview, “When the school orchestra plays at PTA meetings, the Hispanic parents come to hear their children, but they leave after the performance because the rest of the meeting doesn’t pertain to them.” Her statement is an extraordinary commentary on how those who are perceived to be in power by Latin American families, i.e. the parents from the U.S., maintain their status of power in the school, even if the marginalization is subtle and not intentional (Freire, 1996).

Carmen herself states in the following excerpt that she and her friends would like to be part of the parent group, but they are not:

When the PTA meets, they say everything in English; the Hispanic parents don’t understand. When they go for money or when they vote for PTA president, or candidates or for new ideas, the Hispanic parents don’t know what they (the U.S. parents and staff) are talking about it. Everything is fast, and it’s all about money. I don’t know why they don’t translate it. Maybe I understand or I ask Valentina or I talk to Ms. L., the (school) secretary. She explains it to me afterwards. The parents have to spend money to be in PTA and then they don’t want to come
because they don’t understand it. At first, we thought it’s not fair. There are no separate meetings for Spanish speakers and no translators. They don’t have a separate PTA for Spanish speakers. … They (Latin American parents) think the PTA is only for money. There is not inclusion in decisions, for example, vote for secretary, but secretary for what?

Carmen seemed to understand that the PTA parents collect and spend money, but the other school issues, including election of officers and school decision making, were beyond her reach and beyond the reach of the other Latin American parents. Additionally, Carmen’s observation that “everything is fast” suggests that the difference in native languages is not the only obstacle for understanding the meeting’s proceedings. The absence of interpreters at PTA is an obvious marginalization for those who do not speak English. The Spanish language, when spoken by immigrants, is typically devalued in the U.S. (Nieto, 2006), and without interpreters at the meeting, the Latin Americans described by Carmen felt unconnected, with no reason to stay beyond their children’s orchestra performance. Even for those whose English is proficient, the verbal communication of U.S. parents and school staff at large meetings can be intimidating, compromising the non-dominant voice in both dialogue and decision making (Bernhard & Freire, 1999; Freire, 1998/2005; Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Freire contended that language is never neutral. Rapid language patterns, idioms, and colloquialisms used by the U.S. parents and staff can confuse non-English speakers. Martin and Nakayama maintain the most U.S. speech emphasizes forthrightness and individualism. Expressions like “Get to the point” and “Don’t beat around the bush” exemplify this style (p. 204). This style contrasts with the generally “soft” communication style of those from a
collectivist culture, such as the Latin American culture, in which preserving harmony is a higher priority (p. 205).

It seems from the data that both Carmen and Linda perceived that parent groups are powerful entities, but entities perceived to be outside the domain of culturally and linguistically diverse families. It is not lost on these women that the nuances of the U.S. language subjugate their positions at the school and pose a risk for school connection and family engagement. While attendance at parent volunteer meetings alone does not indicate that authentic home-school partnerships exist (Allen, 2007), at such meetings, important decisions are made, volunteer opportunities are offered, and information is disseminated. Decision making is power, and a share of school decision making provides power for families. If parents perceive they are disenfranchised from the decision makers of a school, equity is lost (Auerbach, 2002; Freire, 1998/2005).

**Carmen’s Suggestion to Reduce Tension**

Carmen, who seemed to be the participant most engaged with her children’s schools, suggested that parent-teacher conferences might encourage greater family engagement if they model those in Venezuela, her home country, as described in the following excerpt:

In my country, it’s different. We call it a reunión of representatives or reunión of parents. Everybody comes. They talk about what parents need to do to help each student, and then they tell what parents need to do to help the school. The parents should come in one at a time and hear all about the child from every teacher, not just the homeroom teacher. Then the parents are given directions of what they need to do. It’s very specific and written down. There is no questioning
that you do it, because the teacher asked you to. … They pass a note for each parent of a student, and it will say, “Please come next Wednesday at four for comments on your student.” You need to go because it’s almost required. When you go, the first point is something about your child. For example, “Please help your child with history; she is having some trouble with history; the other classes are fine, or she needs some help with her grades.” The one teacher represents all the teachers. Here (in the U.S.), they have conferences, but … that teacher only talks about her class. In my country, we meet and talk about all the subjects.

Carmen seems to be asking for increased one-to-one dialogue between parents and teachers that is focused on specific student needs, and her description infers a high parental compliance with conference attendance. The picture she paints suggests she would like families and schools to be more connected. The issue of more personal parent conferences seems important to Carmen, as suggested by her collage, which included a depiction of a parent-teacher conference. Following the prompt, “Create a collage that represents, in a perfect world, what your relationship with your child’s school would be,” she depicted teachers and parents together in a reunión (the word written below the picture), suggesting the type of connection and engagement she yearns for. Carmen used a stock photo for the collage showing a culturally diverse group of adults in a large room with separate tables. At each table are two adults and a student. The foreground of the picture shows one adult listening to another adult, who appears to be speaking. Both adults have eye contact with each other. Carmen elaborated on her picture, providing further understanding of reunión with this excerpt:
If parents don’t come, they send a note that is more like an order. … They should be assertive, but nicely. The obligation is there. It’s better to go when the group is there. When the group is there, it’s social. You meet the parents of the other children. A lot of parents want meetings - conferences with the teacher. First the parents would meet individually with teacher, then all the parents would meet together. There, the teacher would give the parents commands, orders to tell the parents what they needed to do. Sometimes the child would be there, but not always. Sometimes the letter would say bring the kids, and sometimes not.

By providing a suggestion for more personal and focused parent conferences, “like in Venezuela,” Carmen seems to imply that some degree of tension exists with U.S. parent teacher conferences. Additionally, while she seems to desire the personal dialogue, she also described the event as a social time, a time to meet and connect with other parents. The social context seems important to her, as is often observed in Latin American cultures (Noel, p.16). Trumbull et al. (2003) report that culturally and linguistically diverse families convey they would like smaller, informal interactions that could supplement the larger, typically confusing school meetings such as Open House and PTA. The request for smaller, more personal conferences focused on student needs is important in light of Henderson and Mapp’s research (2002) emphasizing the significance of family engagement centered on academic activities. Additionally, the literature supports an examination of the dialogue between teachers and families; teachers in the dominant culture often attempt to phrase comments in a positive light, even when there are concerns, which can lead to misinterpretation about how the children of
culturally and linguistically diverse parents are doing in school (Bernhard & Freire, 1999). Bernhard and Freire’s study also found that even English-speaking non-native parents had difficulty interpreting report cards and common phrases, such as “She has special needs, and “She is working at her own pace and needs to be more involved” but were too embarrassed to ask for clarification (p. 81). When such communication confusion exists, connections between home and school, as well as family engagement, are likely to be compromised.

Too Busy to Connect

Another tension that may impede connection and family engagement revealed in the data was the apparent “busyness” of U.S. schools. In some participants’ view, the U.S. school is large and hectic with personnel who often seem busy with the protocol of running a school, in a hurry, or preoccupied with other school matters. This contrasts with the environment of most of the participants’ schools of origin, as they described in interviews. In most Latin American countries, school buildings are small, which leads to a more intimate environment, easier access to staff, and according to participants of this study, a slower pace. Two participants mentioned that their first impression of U.S. schools was how quickly people move about and how fast they talk. Compared to smaller Latin American schools, the teachers of U.S. schools are busy as well. If parents believe a teacher is too busy to meet, to have dialogue, or to make connections in order to discover the skills and competencies of the family, the relationship between home and school may be shallow, and family engagement can be compromised. This could be especially true for parents who view the school personnel as the experts, i.e. the authority (Freire, 1998/2005).
Carmen, mother of two from Venezuela, remarked in an open-ended interview, “Usually (in the U.S.) if you want a parent conference, you have to call to make an appointment. It takes too long, sometimes weeks. But with this good teacher, she would call me.” Carmen’s statement suggests that one teacher went outside the norm of the “busyness” that Carmen viewed as the typical U.S. code of behavior. In responding to Carmen’s needs, this teacher showed she respected Carmen and valued dialogue with her. Thus, a strong connection was made between Carmen and the teacher. However, Carmen’s statement suggests that she believed that “this good teacher” earned the connection by going beyond what is typically found in U.S. schools. If teachers are too busy to meet with families in a timely manner, the opportunity for authentic dialogue between home and school is postponed or lost, which sends a message of disrespect to the parents. When the needs of individuals are ignored or postponed, they feel devalued, and marginalization can occur (Freire, 1968/2000). When marginalization occurs, it is not merely a pedagogical issue, it is an ethical and moral problem (Freire, 1998/2005).

“It’s Not Their Fault”

The busyness of U.S. communication is sometimes felt keenly when Latin Americans first arrive to register their children at school and errors are made. These errors can cause tension and thus compromise a family’s sense of connectedness with the school. For example, if the school staff or the parent is hurried or unaware of administrative differences between the U.S. and other countries, cross-cultural misunderstandings can occur. These misunderstandings stem from people who are operating from different frames of reference. Even families who are familiar with
schooling can misunderstand the U.S. school protocol and fail to notice errors being made.

Misunderstandings are not intentional, but they do arise from assumptions people make. Immigrants coming to a new country typically assume the school, as the institution of power, is operating with procedures the immigrants need to follow. U.S. schools typically assume that immigrants will conform to the guidelines set forth by the school’s local policies. For instance, most U.S. schools operate with the assumption that all school years begin sometime in the fall. However, in South America, the school year begins in late January or February. Three of the participants (Carmen, Laura, and Linda) revealed they experienced misunderstanding about the U.S. system. Linda, Brazilian mother of two daughters, described the error that occurred when she first registered her daughters for school in the U.S.:

We moved here in March. My girls should have been placed a year ahead of where “the lady” put them. They were always the oldest and could have been challenged more. I blame myself. I didn’t understand the system. The lady who took the papers just looked at the grade and said she would go into that grade. In a later interview, Linda retold the story with teary eyes:

I should have known and prepared better. I didn’t pay attention. It’s not their fault. The lady went by her birthday and put her in the grade she thought was right. … They don’t find anything out about my family. But I don’t blame them. They are so overloaded; how can they take on one more responsibility?

The experience still seemed raw for Linda, as suggested by her tears many years after the incident. It appears the miscommunication prevented a connection from being made at
the time and also somewhat dampened Linda’s sense of connection with the school over the years. Linda perceived that her daughters were marginalized, and she blames herself for the absence of dialogue that could have prevented the error. Linda’s blame of herself is not unusual and represents unintentional, yet subtle oppression; Freire (1968/2000) discussed how those who are marginalized often blame themselves for oppression that exists.

In an informal conversation, Laura, Brazilian mother of Lucas, also told of her initial confusion about the U.S. system: “Lucas had just finished seventh grade, so they put him in the middle of eighth grade. I knew nothing about the system, for example the pledge to the flag requirement…or the food.” However, she summed up assertively, “When you come to another country, you should not complain.” This statement provided insight into Laura’s worldview. Laura was the mother who did not ask why the international flags were removed from her son’s school. During interviews, she, as well as the other participants, appeared to be reticent to say anything negative about U.S. schools, especially in the first few sessions. Their original reticence may indicate their initial discomfort with being interviewed by a non-Latin American who is an educator from the dominant culture. However, their candor increased as the study progressed. The study participants eventually understood the U.S. system, but my observations indicate that these experiences of transition from Latin American schools to the U.S. schools were difficult for them. Trumbull et al. (2003) contend that immigrants frequently misunderstand the complexities of the U.S. school system. The authors argue that intentional programs can play an important role in connecting families and unfamiliar U.S. systems. As seen in this chapter, even families who are educated, who value
education, and who are familiar with schooling face multiple tensions that impede their sense of connectedness and family engagement with U.S. schools.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented findings that revealed tensions that impede the development of connectedness and family engagement for culturally and linguistically diverse families. The tensions described by the participants include incidents in which they perceived disrespect from those in authority; stereotyping; misunderstandings due to cultural differences; and marginalization from parental groups that represent power and prestige in their children’s schools (Freire, 1998/2005). In each of the experiences described by the participants, the opportunity for respectful dialogue was somehow compromised or lost. Although the participants did not recount these incidents with the degree of anger displayed by families in studies by Auerbach (2002), Howland et al. (2006), and Reyna (2008), the school experiences described in this chapter were negative. In many cases, the resulting tensions appeared to impede the participants’ development of family engagement. The families in the present study came to the U.S. with a positive approach to education and expressed a desire to feel welcomed and connected to their children’s school. Several wanted to share in school planning and participation, yet in many cases, they were rebuffed or marginalized.

Chapter six will include a summary and discussion of the investigation and a theoretical analysis of the findings. The final chapter also provides implications for practice and policy, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Chapters four and five presented the findings of the present study. This chapter contains the following sections: summary of the study; discussion of the findings through the lens of the conceptual framework; implications and recommendations for practice and policy; recommendations for future research; and conclusion.

Summary

The purpose of the present study was to explore the context, perceptions, and sense of connectedness and family engagement of four middle class families from Latin America who have children in U.S. public schools. Because the literature concludes that strong home-school connections and family engagement are salient factors for student success across all ages and cultural groups, the current study examined these factors in depth with a purposefully chosen group, four middle class families from Latin America.

Choosing participants who have at least a high school education was a significant aspect of the study. By examining family engagement from the perspective of middle class parents who had successful experiences with schooling in their home countries and who came to the U.S. with a positive orientation toward U.S. schools, the study offers the literature a broadened scope and wider demographic range. Additionally, the participants of the current study are not struggling with the complicating effects of poverty. The reported school failure of Latin American groups in general has generated many educational initiatives and research studies that focus on Latin Americans who are experiencing poverty and/or school failure. Consequently, in contrast to the current study, many existing studies of Latin Americans examine populations with less than high school
education, with negative schooling experiences, or those who live in areas with schools that do not meet state standards, which gives them even less power in the dominant society.

Additionally, the voices of families themselves are emerging in family engagement research. The current study thus extends this emerging literature by giving attention to the narratives of first generation Latin American immigrants and their experiences with U.S. schools. Research that gives voice to participants’ stories seeks to sensitize the research community and disrupt a monolithic view of this population. The study was guided by the following research questions and associated sub questions:

1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?
   a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?
   a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America?
   b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America?

The results were obtained through open-ended and in-depth biographical interviews, informal conversations, observations, and collages/drawings.
This study was predicated by four overarching assumptions. First, it was assumed that positive home-school connections must be built on interactions that convey respect for families. Secondly, it is the responsibility of the school to confer respect and work to build connections between school and home. Third, the respect that builds positive connections is based on the school’s acknowledgment that families, especially culturally and linguistically diverse families, have strengths, skills, life experiences, and competencies, i.e. funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Finally, it was assumed that family engagement with a child’s school results in beneficial outcomes for students, schools, and families.

The U.S. school, as an institution of acculturation and education, holds great power in the eyes of immigrant families; the school represents the vehicle for their children’s future success. As educated and experienced parents, the participants of this study were aware that positive home-school interactions benefit their children, and they desired to be positively affiliated with their children’s schools. However, Latin Americans are often considered monolithically “at risk” in both research and in U.S. schools, which can easily lead to stereotyping and marginalization. Furthermore, current literature reveals an often-negative U.S. view of immigrants in general and of Latin American populations in particular (Trueba & McLaren, 2000). For these reasons, the current study was framed by critical theory with an emphasis on social justice, and I intentionally examined the data to explore any incidents of perceived stereotyping or marginalization. The study was guided by the work of Freire (1968/2000; 1998/2005) and Moll (Gonzalez et al., 2005), champions of ethnographic teaching and relationship building between teachers and learners. The funds of knowledge approach, which
explores a family’s strengths and seeks to connect home activities and knowledge with learning, was a well-suited framework for exploring participants’ perceptions of the school’s efforts to form collaborative connections.

The current study extends the extant research on Latin American family engagement with U.S. schools. The literature review revealed that Latin American parents often face barriers to authentic and respectful engagement with their children’s schools. Qualitative studies, such as those by Auerbach (2002), Reyna (2008), and Quirocho and Daoud (2006), uncovered a prevailing deficit view of Latin American families held by school personnel. This negative ideology of teachers and staff in these three studies contrasted with the positive educational expectations the parents held for their children and created or exacerbated adversarial interactions between home and school. Auerbach’s narrative analysis of interviews with working-class parents of students in a college access program found that Latin American parents often felt rebuffed, discounted, or not listened to by school staff. Likewise, Quirocho and Daoud and Reyna reported similar results from their interviews with Latin American families whose children attended under-achieving schools. The parents in these studies believed that the school discounted the parents’ role as support for their children’s education. These three critical qualitative studies enrich educational research by pointing to areas of needed reform as schools interface with increasing culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Survey research also uncovered barriers to family engagement faced by Latin American families. As a result of her survey analysis, Shah (2009) found that how parents feel about their child’s school affects their efforts to engage. Shah argued that
parental involvement is internally driven and that the presence of Latin Americans in positions of power increases Latin American family engagement with the school. Turney and Kao’s 2009 large-scale survey analysis concluded that, even after controlling for socioeconomic variables, non-white immigrant parents of young children faced barriers to family engagement with schools. The authors found that while parents with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to be involved than those with lower status, immigrant parents of all socioeconomic levels, even those who spoke English, often perceived substantial barriers at their child’s school, including feeling unwelcomed (p. 264). While the survey research by Shah (2009) and Turney and Kao (2009) did not provide rich qualitative data, the implication that family engagement is influenced by parental perceptions of school interactions supports the findings of the current study. For example, in the present study, Carmen and her family appeared the most positive about relationships with school personnel, suggesting a high degree of connectedness with the school; they also appear to be the most engaged with their children’s school activities.

The present study expands the demographics found in qualitative research regarding culturally and linguistically diverse populations by exploring the perspectives of families with positive school histories and higher educational levels. The participants of the case studies by Auerbach (2002) and Reyna (2008) had less educational level than those of the present study, and the children of participants in Quiocho and Daoud’s (2006) interview study attended schools described as underperforming. The present study also extends the survey research of Shah (2009) and Turney and Kao (2009) by providing thick qualitative data revealing participants’ personal stories, perceptions, and experiences.
Although the current study’s data indicated that being connected to family and friends is especially important to those from a Latin American culture, the degree to which the schools connected with the participants is complex. The participants of the present study described school incidents that made them feel connected and validated, but also situations in which they felt devalued, marginalized, or alienated from their children’s schools. The findings suggest that communication is an important determining factor that affected the participants’ sense connectedness and desire to engage with the school. Communication of respect that included valuing the participants’ cultural uniqueness promoted connections that lay the foundation for family engagement. Communication that devalues or confuses, as experienced by the participants, created tensions that impede the development of connectedness and family engagement.

Discussion

The fact that a welcoming environment and respectful dialogue provides the milieu for building personal relationships and connecting with parents is perhaps true for all schools and all populations. Communication is often at the heart of many factors that encourage or impede family engagement in any educational setting. The importance of the present study is that it examined these factors through the perspectives of four middle class Latin American families as they recollected adjusting to a new culture, new language, and new customs. Therefore, through their perspectives, educators may see U.S. schools with fresh eyes. Though the participants of the present study were familiar with schooling, they were unfamiliar with the U.S. system when they first arrived as immigrants. As players in a metaphorical “family-school drama,” the families arrived on a school stage full of cultural “complexities and subtleties” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p.
The memories of how the participants experienced their children’s new school in a new culture for the first time were still vivid and have been shaped and perhaps reformed through more recent experiences and reflection.

The participants of the study left their home countries seeking positive opportunities and ready, willing, and able to become connected to their children’s schools. They desired a rigorous education for their children, which is consistent with research that shows culturally and linguistically diverse families want rigorous curricula for their children (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Quiocio and Daoud, 2006). The participants of the present study perceived that the schools their children attend are providing a rigorous curriculum, and they are satisfied that their children are now being successful. The literature revealed that this does not always happen across the U.S.

The findings point to increased connection and family engagement with the school when the school validated the participants’ uniqueness. This was evident as participants related their role in cultural celebrations (all participants), reading to the class in Spanish (Carmen), or translating for other Latin Americans (Carmen and Linda). The participants appeared to express increased self-worth as they discussed each of these examples. Although the data did not reveal that these competencies and experiences were incorporated into classroom lessons, with the exception of Carmen’s experience in the language arts class, it was evident that the families’ sense of affiliation with the school and desire to be engaged increased when their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) were validated. When the school personnel initiated positive dialogue and viewed families with a strengths/abilities based view, it communicated respect, a fact that was not lost on the study’s participants.
Although participants did not specify *teachers* who conveyed stereotyping or deficit views, it appears that communication of respect was not consistently practiced by all personnel. Tensions were revealed, some subtle, such as differences in communication styles or perceived negative body language, and some overt, such as rude comments by school staff and marginalization from decision making groups. The data suggest a perception of “gate keeping” or “frontiers” to hurdle, as illustrated by Laura’s comment:

They don’t make you feel warm, especially when you don’t speak good English. Bad humor. They seem disconnected from the rest of the school. I thought it was because of my English, but they never got nice. They were always rude to me … Once you got past that frontier though, the teachers were nice.

The current investigation also found that perceived unwelcoming interactions with U.S. parents can impede a sense of connectedness with other parents and with the school. Although these interactions were among parents, they occurred at school events and locations where school personnel was present and could have facilitated dialogue, such as at PTA meetings, Field Day, and club sponsored activities. These tensions threatened to impede family engagement, as suggested by comments made, for example, by Carmen’s daughter: “They (Latin American families) leave after the performance because the rest of the (PTA) meeting doesn’t pertain to them,” or by Linda: “I felt like there was no room for me, so I didn’t stay. … If I feel like I’m not needed, I don’t go,” or by Rita: “If the teachers and the American parents had asked us to help plan, we could have helped.” Each of these comments points to missed opportunities for dialogue between home and school as urged by Freire (1998/2005). Each comment represents an incident of isolation and marginalization for some parents who would like to be more
fully engaged with school activities and shared school power. The findings showed, however, that the participants were hesitant to complain. Overall, despite the tensions and negative encounters within the school environment described in this study, they feel connected and positively affiliated with their children’s teachers. Additionally, they perceive that they are engaged with their children’s education, whether that family engagement occurs at school or at home.

\textit{A Closer Look: Resilience, Determination, Positive Attitude}

A striking finding of this study was the discovery of the resilience, determination, and positive attitude that emerged from the data as common elements of the participants’ funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). No one expressed victimization, and all are strongly positively oriented toward the future. Nurmi (2005) speaks of future orientation as thoughtful consideration of what will happen next in one’s life. Being positively oriented toward the future involves a degree of planning and a sense of control. As risk takers, all four participants took control of their lives by leaving their native homes and coming to a new land that represented to them a positive future. Their reasons for coming to the U.S. varied, but they all came from difficult situations, aspiring for a better life for themselves and better education for their children.

All participants held the assumption that the U.S. public education would provide their children the opportunity to be competitive in a global society. All spoke with gratitude that their children are now fluent in English, emphasizing their belief that English is the foremost international language. For example, Carmen expressed the importance for her daughter to learn English while maintaining her native Spanish: “It’s
very important that Valentina is bilingual because if we have to go to another country, or
if we have to back to our country, it would mean Valentina could get a good job.”

For Linda, in addition to the opportunity to learn English, the diversity in the U.S.
schools is a positive. She said this gives her daughters the understanding of other cultures
and the chance to learn to work together with a variety of people: “In Brazil, we don’t
have many immigrants; we have descendents, but not many (from other cultures.) We are
very lucky to be in a (U.S.) school that has diversity.”

In a similar positive manner, Laura interpreted her own poster that showed
Brazilian children under the tree in front of an elementary school: “Here is the boy (her
son), and that shadow of the boy represents his future. His future will be good.” Her
comment is intriguing in its foreshadowing since her son is now a senior in high school
enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes. When probed, she elaborated that she
referred to the boy’s new life, i.e. middle school, high school, college, and as an adult.

Maintaining an orientation to the future does not mean the participants have
ignored past tribulations. Rather, it appears that their past struggles were honing factors
for their determined attitude. For example, Rita’s escape from domestic violence has
framed her perspective about her daughter’s future. When asked to discuss why she came
to the U.S., Rita included what she perceived as a safer environment for women: “I know
you have it (domestic violence) here; it’s everywhere. But the culture is not so machismo
(as in Colombia), and at least if you call the police here, they will come.” With similar
determined optimism, Linda forged a new life for her daughters following multiple
tragedies in Brazil, business losses, and her own serious illness. A statement by Linda
could represent all four families: “The past made me strong.”
Carmen and her husband told of the deteriorating public school conditions and human rights violations currently in their home country, and their need to stay in the U.S. Yet, as Carmen described, transition to a new land is also difficult:

Everything had changed in my life. But I knew it was good for Valentina to be here. I knew in my country, there was not an opportunity for her there. But when I came, I spoke no English…Everywhere we went I didn’t understand it. I just went by numbers. …they talked so fast; (it sounded like) “blub, blub, blub.” I felt impotent …Every day when I walked home from the store, I cried the whole way. Valentina would say, “Mommy, Mommy, what’s wrong?” I said to myself, “How can I stay here in this country? How can I do anything for her?” But I knew I had to stay. We would find a way to make it work, and we did.

The determination of Carmen to “make it work” in a new culture was a disposition that may have resulted in lost opportunity for a rich home-school relationship if not acknowledged and legitimized by the school (Freire, 1998/2005). Instead, the value of the life experiences and resiliency Carmen brought to the U.S. were recognized and reinforced, initially by the kindergarten teacher, who honored rather than devalued Carmen’s language and culture and made personal connections with the family. These connections led to the family’s engagement with the school despite Carmen’s lack of transportation. When Carmen and her family talked about their experiences of family engagement, it was clear through their verbal and nonverbal expression that their affiliation with the school was enhanced. As connections are made and relationships are formed, educators cannot ignore these affective aspects of the conceptual frameworks of

Critical theory assumes that educators who take a critical stance must then translate the theory into practice (Schwandt, 2007). In the next section, implications for practice and policy gleaned from the study’s findings will be discussed, followed by recommendations for future research.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The study’s findings point to opportunities for increased family engagement through positive communication and ethnographic practices that validate families’ knowledge, competencies, skills, and experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Recognizing that there is a positive relationship between family engagement and successful students, the following implications for ethical practice and policies are gleaned from the study’s findings.

Cross-Cultural Competence

The study’s findings showed that, like all parents, the participants desired to feel good about their children’s school. As Laura said, “You want immigrants to feel warm.” Warm and welcoming communication is essential, but not enough. Connecting with culturally and linguistically diverse families requires competencies that validate the families’ culture, experiences, and understandings. One aspect of cross-cultural competence is acknowledging that culturally and linguistically diverse families vary by language, cultural practices, and individual characteristics. Authentic connections may begin when mere knowledge of cultural differences deepens into comprehension and respect of the others’ perspective. Cross-cultural competence requires a deep
understanding that human interactions are charged with assumptions and values held by both parties. For example, a Latin American parent’s reluctance to attend school functions or to question or inquire about school procedures may be seen by the school as indifference. While the school’s assumption may possibly be correct, the absence of family engagement may instead be due to perceived barriers or to the parent’s cultural view of a parent’s role.

It is important to consider what educators view as family engagement. The participants provided supportive roles in all cases, and they described this support throughout the study. Their respect for education and their expectation for their children’s success certainly portray them as engaged in their children’s schooling. It is essential to acknowledge that engagement in a child’s education is often deeper than their appearances at the school, and is sometimes hidden from view.

Embedded within the interactions between home and school are relations of power, with school personnel and all who represent the school holding the power. The school has the chance to use its authority positively with an environment that facilitates opportunities for family engagement and power sharing. However, power may be seen by immigrants as a “frontier” to negotiate, as Laura described, or power may serve to discourage newcomers from even entering and becoming connected to the school. The findings uncovered that even nonverbal communication on the part of school personnel has the potential to be alienating to parents from cultures where intuition and warmth are key descriptors. Awareness that the U.S. culture is often perceived as competitive, busy, or even abrupt provides opportunities for school personnel to moderate their communication with those from other cultures. In addition, the findings suggest that
parent-teacher communication that uses direct, clear language lessens confusion. Member checking and the use of interpreters or liaisons help to assure parent understanding.

Discovering the families’ funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), offers the opportunity for schools to convey respect to families, to deepen home-school connections, and to increase family engagement. Utilizing a funds of knowledge approach does not replace the required state standards; rather it is additive and can enrich lessons related to state standards. By so doing, teachers validate the competence of students and their families. Importantly, using this ethnographic approach connects what is known and familiar to new learning, which follows best practices of mediated learning (Vygotsky, et al., 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Culturally responsive teaching involves students in the construction of knowledge by immersing them in activities that have personal meaning. Inviting family members to help plan, teach, or enrich a lesson, such as was the case with participant Carmen, values the families as outside experts and is a school reform practice urged by Copland and Knapp (2006).

Given the limited time and energy available and the stress that accompanies being an educator in today’s U.S. schools, altering one’s classroom practice may not be easy. However, as shown by Moll et al. (2005), one activity may be the genesis of multiple lessons throughout the curriculum, providing numerous benefits to both teachers and students. To assist in the adoption of new approaches, professional learning communities where ideas (and the work) can be shared can create a web of support among colleagues (Spillane, 2006).
Distributed Leadership

The school-based implications of the present study require a change or sharpening of focus for which school administrators have responsibility. The administrators’ dilemma is always how to best effect change. Initiatives cannot be implemented alone; leadership in today’s environment can no longer rely on one person, even the charismatic leader. To be sustainable, leadership must be spread deep and wide, and new leaders must be nourished (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). A plan of distributed leadership, as outlined by Spillane (2006), could be the vehicle used to forward cross-cultural competence and culturally responsive practices. Distributed leadership could provide a sustainable path for increasing family engagement by establishing a strengths/abilities based view of all families, including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse from the dominant culture. Additionally, and importantly, principals can indirectly affect student achievement by establishing a system of distributed leadership (Harris, 2006).

By building connected networks that include all staff and families, including culturally and linguistically diverse families, distributed leadership can be viewed as a series of interactions between leaders, followers, and situations that occur (Spillane, 2006, p. 23). Professional development regarding specific school issues can occur locally within communities of learners and thus provide meaningful dialogue for problem solving and for increasing cultural responsiveness. This co-construction of knowledge is championed in a distributed leadership model (Harris, 2006). For example, as professional development relates to the present study, teachers could form a book study and then share the responsibility for initiating lessons incorporating a funds of knowledge
(Gonzalez et al., 2005) approach. At another time, an outside expert could conduct a workshop with the staff on communication that conveys respect.

Importantly, advocates of distributed leadership also value parents as essential stakeholders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), a philosophy that intersects with the conceptual framework for the present study. A resulting safe environment may thereby increase these families’ sense of connectedness and family engagement with the school, affording the opportunity for their voices to be heard. Establishing a safe environment includes monitoring PTA meetings, providing interpreters and appropriate translation of written communication, and striving for inclusive representation on decision making committees to provide opportunities for agency. A model of distributed leadership is well suited for the use of fictive kin, as described in the present study. As culturally and linguistically diverse families become part of the distributed support network, they may act as intermediaries for other parents, as exemplified by Carmen, thereby buttressing the connections between home and school and strengthening the entire system. The resulting network not only endorses the parents’ competence, but it can provide broad-based support for others who need assistance negotiating a new culture or voicing their own concerns, as described by Auerbach (2002).

Although anti-immigrant sentiment in the public sector is beyond the control of the school, a school culture that honors human dignity with respectful verbal and nonverbal communication can be established through administrative expectation and modeling (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). A culture of respect would encourage teachers and staff to reflect on the power they have, both in their position, and if they are from the dominant culture, in their ethnicity.
Two of the present study’s participants discussed Latin American school staff who deepened the parents’ perception of connectedness to the school. Shah (2009) found that Latin American administrative staff representation provides higher motivation for Latin American family engagement. Thus, the presence of an administrator who aligns with the culture of the culturally and linguistically diverse families shows a commitment to equity and provides a signifier of social justice for the families.

Teacher Preparation Programs

If given opportunities to observe, carry out instruction, and reflect in an atmosphere that explores student and family competencies, preservice teachers may learn how to make authentic and respectful connections between home and school. Collaboration with school systems whose mentors for preservice teachers adopt a strengths/abilities based ideology is needed. Preservice teachers need the experience of working with families, and they may even need guidance just learning to communicate with parents. It is crucial for preservice teachers to learn teaching practices that are culturally responsive. They need to be shown how to transform students’ funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) into classroom learning. Further, preservice teachers need a theoretical background that includes an understanding of cultural competencies in addition to major concepts, such as critical theory and social constructivism. Providing the most recent research on how children learn reinforces a strengths/abilities based view and can be exciting for preservice teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the increasing number of families in U.S. schools from the non-dominant culture, continued research that investigates interactions between home and school is
crucial. More research in this area would strengthen the findings of the present study. Qualitative studies providing a voice for participants from a wider range of socioeconomic and educational levels are also recommended.

Further, examining how a funds of knowledge teaching approach correlates with student success as measured by current state and national assessments will provide insight to educators and curriculum decision makers. Especially interesting is the possible interaction of the funds of knowledge approach and parental self-worth; research focusing on parental and/or student self-efficacy vis-à-vis ethnographic teaching is recommended. Additionally, the study’s findings intimate a recursive relationship between affiliation and family engagement. That is, affiliation with the school seems to lead to more family engagement, and engagement appears to lead to increased feelings of connectedness with the school. Research on this aspect of family engagement would be valuable and is recommended.

New research that examines the cognitive flexibility and resilience of immigrant children amid shifting environments in the U.S. is interesting and will expand the literature on how children learn. How individuals, especially children, sustain and use multiple languages is also an intriguing area for future research. Similarly, examining the social and emotional health of immigrant children who are reared amid anti-immigrant societal pressure is critical.

The immigration status of parents cannot be ignored when researchers study family engagement. Although the societal issue is complex and political, research on how immigration status intersects with family engagement is needed. In addition, continued
research with culturally and linguistically diverse populations from the middle class will supplement the extant research on families who face more serious economic difficulties.

Turney and Kao (2009) state that more attention has been focused on family engagement of parents of older students than parents of very young children. Thus, continued research on family engagement of parents of younger culturally and linguistically diverse children is needed. These authors further report that researchers typically define family engagement as attendance at meetings and volunteering at the school. Research that broadens the definition of family engagement is worth consideration. For example, although Rita, the young mother of a first grade daughter, is unable to go to the school often, she considers herself fully engaged in her daughter’s education by virtue of the fact that she communicates regularly with teachers. In what other ways do parents consider themselves engaged with their child’s education? Do schools recognize and value different types of family engagement?

Finally, it is possible that the present study conducted by a Latin American researcher could yield different or more candid responses from the Latin American participants. As a white educator who represents the dominant society, I did not have automatic “insider status” with the participants. The participants’ language, cultural histories, and experiences differ from my own, and unlike them, I have not experienced immigration to a new land. While they seemed to still consider themselves guests in the U.S., they allowed me, for a time, to be a guest in their homes and lives. Although it appeared that their trust was easily gained through warmth, respect, assurances of anonymity, as well as our mutual interests, the participants may have experienced the study differently with a Latin American researcher with common cultural experiences
and a common language. Further qualitative research with this framework is recommended.

Conclusion

The current study examined the perspectives of four families who highly value education and whose lives seem dedicated to assuring the educational success of their children on a daily basis. Being connected to their families, friends, and their children’s schools is highly important to them. Despite tensions, marginalization, and incidents of isolation and alienation, the desire to be connected and to be engaged with their children’s education remains paramount. It appears they feel connected and affiliated to their children’s schools, especially to the teachers, for whom they have high praise.

The tensions, stereotyping, and marginalization that occurred should catch the attention of educators everywhere. These four families showed determination and resilience, but not all culturally and linguistically diverse families respond alike. The literature exposes a prevailing deficit view of culturally and linguistically diverse families among U.S. educators. Anti-immigrant fever, especially against Latin Americans, appears to be growing in U.S. society just as this population is increasing in U.S. schools. We do not know what the next generation will be like, but as an institution of power and acculturation, it is the responsibility of educators to create and maintain a school culture of respect for all families. A culture of respect requires a philosophy that permeates throughout the school environment and is demonstrated by all employees. A culture of respect is one that welcomes the uniqueness of individuals, one that seeks ways to allow all families opportunities for power sharing, and one that, while addressing student needs, assumes first that families have unique strengths and abilities.
Closing

In the process of exploring Latin American family perspectives on home-school connections and family engagement, the research journey unveiled manifold aspects needing further consideration by educators. These layered areas include how teachers can make sustained and authentic connections with families, how children who have multiple cultural identities learn best, and how communication affects families, especially those who are new to U.S. schools. The present study uncovered that these topics are the mere beginning, the basic foundation, of applied practice and future research regarding culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families. Freire once stated that knowledge and events are “always wrapped in thick wrappers” (1996, p. 16). Freire’s metaphor is appropriate for my research experience. I continue to ponder: how will educators use these rich resources to increase opportunities for student success? Is a funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) approach doable given the demands of restricted curricula and high-stakes accountability? Or, will educators find ethnographic teaching an advantageous approach for linking the familiar with new learning (Freire, 1998/2005; Vygotsky, et al., 1978)?

As I reflect on the participants’ experiences, resilience, and ability to negotiate in multiple environments, I am filled with respect for their fortitude and positive approach to life amid an environment that is not always easy and often unkind. Taking a broad view, critical researchers urge educators to seek the bigger picture, that is, equity and social justice, rather than a one-size-fits-all ideology. We must be open to practices that raise life’s chances for culturally and linguistically diverse families and their children,
including ridding ourselves of deficit thinking. The onus is on the schools. The dialogue of respect may begin with a simple greeting: *Bienvenido! Bem-vindo!*
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### Appendix A

Data Collection Planning Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question - What do I need to know?</th>
<th>Why do I need to know this?</th>
<th>From which data sources will answers be elicited?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1. How do four middle class families from Latin America perceive that their child’s school makes efforts to connect with them?** | • Caring, trusting relationships between school and family enhance engagement (Mapp, 2003).  
• Empowerment of participants through discussion  
• Implications for educational practice | • In-depth biographical interviews  
• Open-ended interviews  
• Informal conversations  
• Observations  
• Collages |
| a. What factors contribute to the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America? | | |
| b. What factors contribute to the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America? | | |
| **2. What tensions are inherent in the interactions between schools and four middle class families from Latin America?** | • Research correlates family engagement with school success but shows barriers  
• Social justice and more equity for a non-dominant societal group  
• Little research on Latin American middle class parents’ perspectives of U.S. schools  
• Implications for educational practice | • In-depth biographical interviews  
• Open-ended interviews  
• Informal conversations  
• Observations  
• Collages |
| a. What tensions impede the development of connectedness between home and school for four middle class families from Latin America? | | |
| b. What tensions impede the development of family engagement for four middle class families from Latin America? | | |
Appendix B

Consent Form

I agree to participate in a research project entitled Factors That Influence School Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families: Is the Invitation There? which is being conducted by Janet Clark, 3121 Kennesaw Hall, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, 404-422-3065. I understand that this participation is voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time and have the results of the participation returned to me, removed from the experimental records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The reason for the research is to understand what things cause me to feel connected or disconnected with my child’s school. The researcher hopes that exploring these issues will help all educators to improve their practice and their relationships with families, especially families who are from another culture. The benefit that I may expect from it is that I have the opportunity to share my experiences and perhaps offer ideas for change.

2. The procedures are as follows: The researcher will interview me between April and July, 2010 about my experiences with my child’s school. There will also be an interview that provides the researcher with some background about my life experiences and my own childhood school. The interviews will take about 30-45 minutes each. I will also be invited to make three collages to illustrate my experiences. I do not have to answer any question that makes me uncomfortable or make an illustration if I do not want to. In addition to the interviews, the researcher and I will have some informal conversations, and the researcher will ask me to talk about my collages when they are completed. The interviews and conversations will take place at the language school, and/or, with my permission, at my home. The researcher will write a report that will be read by other educators. All information from the interviews will be kept on a password-protected computer in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home and will be deleted by December 2011. Also, any paper copies of the researcher’s notes will be shredded by December 2011.

3. During this research, there may be possible discomfort responding to certain queries that might evoke a visceral response. I understand that I do not have to participate in any portion that makes me uncomfortable.

4. There are no known risks other than the possible discomfort described above.

5. The results of this participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent unless required by law. The researcher plans to use first names only in the report, and if I wish, I can use a false name instead of my own.
Please sign both copies. Keep one and return the other to the investigator.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to Dr. Ginny Q. Zhan, Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #2202, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (770) 423-6679.
Appendix C

Sample In-depth Biographical Questions

1. Where were you born? Tell me about your town and the people who live/lived there. What is the culture like?
   Probe

2. Describe your early school career.
   Probe

3. Tell me all about your school, teachers, and friends when you were a child.
   Anything else?

4. Describe how important school was to your parents, family, and friends.
   Probe

5. Tell me about your parents.

6. What are the greatest accomplishments of your culture?
   Probe
   Anything else?

7. What is your proudest accomplishment?
   Tell me all about that.
Appendix D

Sample Open-ended Interview Questions

1. Think about the school your child attends and the teachers in the school and the administrators in the schools. How can you tell if the teachers and administrators care or do not care about the success of your child in school?  
   Probe

2. In what ways could you tell if the teachers care or do not care about the happiness and well being of your child in school?  
   Probe

3. In what ways do you feel you are included or not included in what is going on at school?  
   And why do you say that?  
   Anything else?

4. What does the school know about your family? What would you like them to know?  
   Probe

5. If anyone at the school has asked you to help with an activity or lesson, please tell me all about that.

6. Is there anything that would make you want to participate more often at your child’s school?  
   Probe

7. Describe anything special for parents, such as programs, language classes, or parent meetings, at your child’s school. (If answer given,) Describe which of these you attend.  
   Tell me about that. Why or why not?

8. What kinds of activities make you think your child is getting a good education?  
   And why do you say that?  
   Anything else?

9. How does your child’s school work towards building relationships with people of other cultures?  
   And why do you say that?  
   Anything else?
10. What was your first impression of the school, starting with the first day? Did you notice any smells or sounds that seemed familiar?

11. Let’s talk about the curriculum. Do you think it’s rigorous? Too hard? Too easy? Please tell me why you feel that way.

12. Tell me about your family. What is important to you about your family?
   Probe

13. Who or what frightened you or your child, starting with the first day of school?

14. Who or what put you or your child at ease, starting with the first day of school?

15. What continues to disturb/confuse/puzzle you about your child’s school/classroom?

16. If you could change anything at your child’s school, what would you change? Anything else?
Appendix E

Sample Guiding Topics for Informal Conversations

1. When did your child begin school? Tell me about that year.

2. Describe the neighborhood and culture of your child’s school.

3. Describe the faculty.

4. Describe the other students’ families. How do they dress, wear their hair?
   Probe

5. Describe the language spoken at your child’s school.

6. What foods are offered in the cafeteria?

7. Tell me about the school’s environment.

8. What does your child’s classroom look like?
   Tell me about the bulletin boards, visuals, word walls, etc.

9. Describe your child’s teacher(s) and administrators.
   What do they do to make culturally and linguistically diverse children or families feel welcome? Do they know how to speak your language? How does that make you feel?
Appendix F

Collages/Drawings

#1

Prompt: “Create a collage that will make me feel like I am back in your country.”

(Rita)
Prompt: “Create a collage that represents, in a perfect world, what your relationship with your child’s school would be.”

(Rita)
#3

Prompt: “Create a collage that represents, in a perfect world, what your relationship with your child’s school would be.”

(Laura)
#4

Prompt: “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your school.”

(Lucas, teen son of Laura)
Prompt: “Create a collage that will make me feel like I am back in your country.”

(Laura)
Prompt: “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your child’s school.”

(Laura)
Prompt: “Create a collage that represents your relationship with your child’s school.”

(Laura)