

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What is the connection between the actions of the principal and the involvement of Latino immigrant parents in an elementary school setting?

Alicia Miguel* & Barbara N. Martin†

Kansas City Ks Public Schools / University of Central Missouri

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The purpose of this case study was to explore the connection between the leadership behavior and actions of an urban school principal and the school involvement of Latino immigrant parents. The findings revealed two themes that emerged from the actions of the principal: 1) Institutional Receptivity, and 2) Awakening to Self-Reliance. The implications of this inquiry for practice in education could affect both K-12 institutions and higher education institutions as they address the issues of diversity in schools, parental involvement, and giving voice to the marginalized, thus creating truly inclusive school climates.

Key words: Latino, parental involvement, principal

The United States' Latino population grew by 1.4 million in 2007 to reach 45.5 million people, or 15.1% of the total U.S. population of 301.6 million, affirming that Hispanics continue to be the largest minority group and the fastest-growing group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Sustained high levels of immigration have also led to a rapid increase in the number of children with immigrant parents. By 2000, immigrants represented one in nine of all United States residents; however, their children represented one in five of all children under age 18. According to the Department of Education, America's 5.4 million Limited English Proficient (LEP) students represent the fastest-growing student population, expected to make up one of every four students by 2025 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

At the same time that changes are occurring in the school populations, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* (NCLB, 2002) has set new educational accountability standards for American public schools (Stecher & Kirby, 2004). Schools are now expected to reach new levels of performance measured by different constructs, one of

* Email: aliciamkcmo@yahoo.com

† Email: bmartin@ucmo.edu

which is parental involvement. One of the reasons for this new accountability measure is that parental involvement in children's education has been associated with children's school success, including higher academic achievement, better behavior, lower absenteeism, and increased positive attitudes toward school (Overstreet, Dvine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005). This brings to the forefront an area often neglected by schools (Ingram, Wolfe, & Leferman, 2007), especially in the case of immigrant populations, which presents an extra challenge in the area of parent participation (Lopez, 2001). Language and culture play a big role in the participation of Latino immigrant parents, and principals need to resort to creative strategies to attract these parents into their schools (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

The higher expectation for increased parental participation may be a challenge in itself, as schools face this charge of involving parents in their children's academic life, while at the same time schools experience an increase in immigrant population. This adds new demands for creating just, equitable and successful schools (Arce, Luna, Borjian, & Conrad, 2005; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Mayers, 2006). Ramirez (2003) noted that children benefit from parental school involvement, and in particular immigrant children, when their parents become more knowledgeable about the school culture and how to navigate the educational system in general. In an attempt to make schools more welcoming, the actions principals take and the manner in which these actions are executed may hold the key to why some schools have high parent participation and why others do not (Blankstein, 2004; Hoerr, 2005). Therefore the purpose of this paper was to explore an elementary principal's behaviors, practices, and the connection to the participation of Latino immigrant parents in school life.

Conceptual Underpinnings

To examine inequities based on race, language, or culture, we utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is becoming an increasingly important tool to broaden and deepen the analysis of the racialized barriers erected for people of color (Solorzano, Villapando, & Oseguera., 2005). As Desimone (1999) stated, "One of the driving forces of education policy in the United States is the desire to equalize disparities in schooling opportunities and outcomes" (p. 11). Lewis, James, Hancock, and Hill-Jackson (2008) emphasized this notion of disparity by arguing that "schools are born from, maintained by, and reproduced from racist philosophies, policies, and practices in education" (p. 136), and that the result is "an educational system that lacks resource equity, thus perpetuating the achievement gap and other race- and class-based social inequalities in American society" (p. 137).

CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Marx (2008) explained that CRT attempts to elucidate that racism is a system of advantage based on race that privileges Whites at the same time that it disadvantages people of color (p. 31). This theory also considers racism to be pervasive and structurally endemic in the American society (p. 31). Schools, which mirror the diversity, the strengths, and the weaknesses of this society, are likewise affected by racial inequality (Marx, 2008; Parker & Villapando, 2007).

Consequently, using CRT as the interpretative lens, we examined what an elementary principal did or did not do in order to encourage the participation of Latino immigrant parents. Since CRT “is grounded in the particulars of a social reality that is defined by our experiences and the collective historical experience of our communities of origin” (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 3), we deemed it an appropriate conceptual framework.

Furthermore, CRT in education explores the ways in which “race-neutral” laws and institutional structures, practices, and policies perpetuate racial/ethnic educational inequality (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 274). This framework emphasizes the importance of viewing policies and policy making within a proper historical and cultural context to deconstruct their racialized content (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996). It challenges dominant liberal ideas of color blindness and meritocracy and shows how these ideas operate to disadvantage people of color while further advantaging Whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The body of literature on CRT has identified five central themes (Parker & Villapando, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005) that delineate critical implications for educational leadership:

The Centrality of Race and Racism

CRT acknowledges as its most basic premise that race and racism are a defining characteristic of American society, and therefore embedded in the structures, discourses, and policies that guide the daily practices of educational institutions. Race and racism are central constructs but also intersect with other components of one’s identity, such as language, generation status, gender, sexuality, and class (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Parker & Villapando, 2007; Yosso, 2005). For people of color, each of these elements of one’s identity can relate to other forms of subordination (Crenshaw et al., 1996), yet each dimension cannot fully explain the other. For example, language oppression by itself cannot account for racial oppression nor can racial oppression alone account for class oppression (Solorzano et al., 2005).

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

CRT challenges the traditional claims of educational institutions to objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. This theoretical framework reveals how the dominant ideology of color blindness and race neutrality acts as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in American society (Bell, 1992; Lopez, 2001; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

A Commitment to Social Justice

CRT has a fundamental commitment to a social justice agenda that struggles to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, generation status, and class subordination (Matsuda et al., 1993; Matsuda, 1996; Solorzano et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005). Giving voice to marginalized people through storytelling is an essential

component of CRT. This is the conduit to achieve social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and to give recognition and acknowledgement to the experiences of people of color through the role of storytelling. The role of storytelling is to give recognition and acknowledgement to the experiences of people of color, as explained by Delgado and Stefancic.

A Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination (Yosso, 2005). This experiential knowledge of people of color can be centered and viewed as a resource stemming directly from their lived experiences (Solorzan et al., 2005) and can come from storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Henderson et al., 2007; Ramirez, 2003; Yozzo, 2005).

A Transdisciplinary Perspective

CRT goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to analyze race and racism within both historical and contemporary contexts (Yosso, 2005). It draws on scholarship from ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, law, and other fields (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005). These defining elements form the basic assumptions, perspectives, research methods, and pedagogies of CRT (Matsuda et al., 1993; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2005). Equally importantly, these elements help to frame this examination of Latino parent involvement. It could be argued that Latina/Latino critical theory (LatCrit) (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), which is similar to CRT, could have been used in this study. As "LatCrit is a theory that elucidates Latinas/Latinos' multidimensional identities and can address the intersection of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression." (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 312). LatCrit theorists intend to center Latinas/os' multiple internal diversities and to situate Latinas/os in larger inter-group frameworks, both domestically and globally, to promote social justice awareness and activism (Chang & Fuller, 2000; Yosso, 2005). LatCrit theorizes about the ways in which the law and its structures, processes, and discourses affect people of color, especially the Latina/o communities (Johnson, 2000). LatCrit theory is conceived as an anti-subordination and anti-essentialist project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). It is a framework that addresses racism and its oppressions beyond the Black/White binary (Yosso, 2005), and discusses the importance of retaining Latina/os culture and resisting pressure to assimilate (Martinez, 2000). One of the tasks for LatCrit is to challenge settled, exclusionary norms through counterstories in order to create more inclusive justice norms (Chang & Fuller, 2000).

For the purposes of this study, we used a CRT lens (Yosso, 2005; Marx, 2008) rather than LatCrit theory, since LatCrit concentrates more specifically on the resistance of Latinos to the established system (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005). By using CRT, we attempted to establish behaviors found in schools that encourage or discourage parent participation of Latino immigrants, and how they respond to the

different strategies used by school personnel (Desimone, 1999). LatCrit theory would be more appropriate if the researchers were investigating the resistance parents present to the educational system; however, that was not the focus of this investigation.

Leadership and Parent Participation

Larson and Ovando (2000) argued, "People must trust their leaders if effective systems are to be achieved and maintained." (p. 62) One of the challenges these leaders face is the ability to build this trust in parents, as well as the population the organization serves and the customers or stakeholders, in this case students and parents (Henderson et al, 2007). "An interrelated set of mutual dependencies are [sic] embedded within the social exchanges in any school community... All participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts." (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 40) With this in mind, several questions arise: How do parents relate to school leaders? What role do ethnic identity, language, and leadership styles play in parent participation? How do parents' own school experiences influence their participation in school? What can principals do to overcome negative past experiences and encourage parents to participate in their children's educational life? (Blankstein, 2004; Crozier, 2001; Payne, 1996; Ramirez, 2003; Yan & Lin, 2005).

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) suggested that observing leadership practice might yield more insight into the relationship between leadership and school innovations. Spillane et al. also added an interesting twist to the study of leadership. When leadership is studied in an educational organization, the assumption is made that the principal of the school is identified as the leader. These authors advocated that individuals other than principals also have positions of leadership. In the search for understanding how school leadership affects immigrant parent participation, it may be beneficial to follow the lead of Spillane et al. and find alternative leadership positions in addition to that of the principal when looking at parent participation (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2004; Lambert, 1998).

Much of the research on successful schools suggests that "effective schools foster and engender a climate of caring, respect, egalitarianism, collaboration, and a steadfast belief that all children can succeed" (Lopez, 2001, p. 419). These schools promote collaboration between school and home, and strive to transform schools into community of learners, where everyone is valued and welcome (Blankstein, 2004; Constantino, 2003; Henderson et al., 2007; Hoerr, 2005; Overstreet et al., 2004). In order to do this, schools need to disassemble the barriers that inhibit this type of collaboration. Schools do not exist in isolation, and there is a push for a more visible presence of parents of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (Crozier, 2001; Ingram et al., 2007; Larson & Ovando, 2000; Lopez, 2001). A successful leader will be aware of all these issues and will understand the differences between parents and students (Blankstein, 2004; Crozier, 2001; Senge, 2005; Yan & Lin, 2005) in such a way as to be able not only to serve their diverse needs but also to tap into their resources and involve them in school.

When immigrant parents do not respond to traditional parent involvement activities, educators assume that these parents do not care about their children's education (Ramirez, 2003). In reality, most immigrant parents care deeply but may not know or understand the expectations that educators have of them to become involved

(Noguera, 2003). Most immigrant parents operate under the assumption that it is the teacher's job to educate a child, and interfering with that would be considered disrespectful of the teacher's skills (Sobel & Kugler, 2007; Wong & Hughes, 2006).

Lopez (2001) revealed that Latino immigrant parents are already involved in the educational lives of their children, although not in the traditional understanding of parental involvement, and determined that schools must consider an alternative conceptualization of parental involvement (Payne, 2004). Educators must recognize the diversity within cultural groups to avoid stereotyping people and to understand that behaviors and patterns of thinking are culturally bound (Chamberlain, 2005).

When addressing the needs of Latino students, school personnel must also recognize the differences among Latino families. Ramirez (2003, p. 105) postulated that, "understanding the cultural and ethnic differences within the Latino population, teachers may have severe mishaps while addressing and communicating information to students and families." To illustrate, Lopez (2001) reported that in a study he conducted an immigrant family's idea of parental involvement was teaching their children to appreciate the value of their education. The parents saw this as an opportunity to "encourage children to break out of the cycle of poverty by continuing their education" (p. 422). This case is an example of how the transmission of socio-cultural values has not been documented as a form of parental involvement, which may sometimes have a stronger impact than physically attending school events (Payne, 2004). This leads to the suggestion that immigrant parents may perceive the concept of involvement in a radically different way from that of educators in schools (Auerbach, 2006).

Therefore, schools must look beyond the typical idea of parental involvement and embrace the many ways in which culturally different parents approach their children's schooling (Henderson et al., 2007). Educators must start identifying the different ways in which immigrant parents are already involved in their children's education. Schools might also look for creative ways to benefit from these existing practices by encouraging parents to continue doing what they are doing (Auerbach, 2006).

Latino immigrant parents often speak of "apoyo" or support rather than involvement (Auerbach, 2006). School personnel should not disregard this type of involvement, since Latino immigrant parents believe their role is to provide the moral foundation for effective schooling by guiding their children at home (Lambert, 1998). Schools should stop measuring parental involvement by using the one-dimensional definition, but rather measure it across dimensions according to each community's values and meanings (Payne, 2004). Once school officials expand their definition of what constitutes effective parental involvement, they will start developing strategies that will really involve parents at every possible level (Kuykendall, 2004).

Scholars (Constantino, 2003; Hoerr, 2005) supported the notion that the challenge to school leaders is to find ways to acknowledge that immigrant parents are interested in the education of their children, and that not all know how to get involved, or would feel comfortable with the traditional ways of involvement.

This review of literature led to four main questions that guided this research study:

1. How does principal behavior influence the participation of Latino immigrant parents?
2. What are some of the strategies that encourage Latino immigrant parents to get involved in school?

3. What are some of the ways in which Latino immigrant parents get involved in their children's school life?
4. How has the school leader given voice to Latino immigrant parents?

Methodology

Qualitative Research

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the connection between a school leader's actions and the level of parent participation in their children's school. Qualitative research seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena, and understand the meaning people construct and how they make sense of the world (Merriam, 1998). According to Libarkin and Kurdziel (2002), "both quantitative and qualitative methods are concerned with exploring phenomena.... Qualitative analysis is primarily concerned with gaining direct experience with a setting, while quantitative analysis seeks to document occurrences passively" (p. 79). "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The empirical goal of this study was to understand the experiences of the participants, and in this particular case, their reaction to the actions of the principal and school personnel. Therefore, the emphasis on the participants' voice and the recount of their experiences is crucial for this understanding. The use of a case study seemed therefore most appropriate, since CRT, which guided this study, uses storytelling as a critical component (Parker & Villapando, 2007).

Population and Sample

The school district from which the elementary school was selected is in a large metropolitan city in the Midwest region of the United States. It has a total student population of 19,996 students, with an ethnic distribution of 2.2% Asian, 65.4% African American, 23.8% Hispanic, 0.2% Native Americans, and 8.3% Caucasian. The school district has a total employee population of 4,627 employees. The ethnic breakdown is 37.17% Caucasian, 56.11% African American, 5.04% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian, and 0.39 Native American. The total district count for teachers is 1,848, distributed throughout 57 buildings.

The urban elementary school setting was purposefully selected (Creswell, 2003) because of its location, diverse student populations, and high Latino immigrant parent participation. The elementary school has a total population of 303 students, with an ethnic distribution of 13.9% Caucasian, 9.6% African American, 73.6% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. It has a staff of 45 people, among administration, faculty, support personnel and custodial and cafeteria staff. The ethnic distribution of the school staff is 45% Caucasian, 38% African American, 9% Hispanic, and 4.5% Asian. When considering only the 31 certified staff, the percentages of ethnic distribution show a slightly different picture, with 54% Caucasian, 32% African American, 6.4% Hispanic, and 6.4% Asian.

The principal has been at the school for several years. There has been some staff turnover in the last couple of years, mainly because of retirement. The staff has received professional development in the area of sheltered instruction (Echevarria,

Short, & Vogt, 2004), which helps teachers deliver content at grade level while developing English language at the same time.

The school is set in the heart of a working class neighborhood. It is a diverse neighborhood, with a majority Hispanic population. Stores around the school show advertisements of Latin American products, usually in Spanish. The school building is an old brick building with an unmistakable school architectural style. To be able to enter the building, visitors must ring a bell and be buzzed in by the inside. This is customary in all elementary schools in the district. Entering the building, the atmosphere is welcoming and friendly. School staffs are friendly. Student work is exhibited on bulletin boards and in the classrooms, and all signage is displayed both in English and in Spanish. Informational printed material for parents is handy and available also in both languages. Most of the students in the school live in the neighborhood, and either walk to school or ride to school with a parent. The school has only one school bus, which means they have a very small number of students who live more than 1.5 miles from school.

Each participant interviewed or included in a focus group was purposefully selected to “facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 73) because of their experience with in the school setting and their particular role in the students’ lives. The participants in this single case study consisted of 1) the principal of the school, 2) eight teachers of the school, 3) eight Latino immigrant parents whose children attend the school, and 4) the school secretary.

Instrumentation

Before beginning the onsite interviews, the researchers secured permission from the district’s gatekeeper and the school leader to conduct research and to have access to the parents and faculty of the school. The researchers then completed the formal Institutional Review Board application, which included providing information about the purpose and extent of the study. Obtained prior to the collection of data were informed consents from all participants.

Interview Protocols. Individual interviews were conducted with the Caucasian principal, the bilingual Caucasian secretary, and two bilingual Latino parents. The interview protocol was semi structured and was conducted in English and Spanish. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions that allowed the researcher to gain insight into the study’s fundamental questions. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed by the researchers. Used to ensure that the researchers accurately captured the core of the stories from participants was member checking (Merriam, 2002).

Focus Groups. The two focus groups’ participants were randomly selected from teachers (n=8) and parents (n=6) of the school. The goal was to develop a sample that provided an information-rich case (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus group with parents was conducted in Spanish to ensure that the Latino parents in the sampling group would feel comfortable in sharing their views without being preoccupied with the language used.

Observations. Observations were conducted during parent teacher conferences, parent meetings, in the office, and general observations of beginning of the day and dismissal time (interactions between staff and parents). The observations occurred

during an entire semester of school (approximately 16 weeks). An observation guide was created with a listing of CRT features to be addressed during each particular observation. Systematically recorded for later review and analysis were the field notes.

Document Analysis. The researchers initially analyzed documents that could address the research questions driving the study. Included were documents that could shed light on whether Latino parents were actively involved in school (parental involvement plan, sign-in sheets, records of parent teacher conferences). Also included were documents that would start constructing images regarding the actions that either promoted or hindered parent participation, such as flyers or letters that were sent home to parents, and signage around the school.

As the study evolved, the researchers allowed the content of interviews and observations and the themes developed from the coding of the interviews to expand the list of documents to be reviewed, and that may not have been considered before. Examples of these documents were student weekly progress reports, parent meeting agendas, and letters written by parents to district officials regarding issues at the school.

Data Analysis

The data collected for the purposes of this study generated a detailed description of both the setting and the participants involved, followed by an analysis of the data for themes (Creswell, 2003). In order to triangulate the data, the information provided by the interviews was used alongside the field observation data, the focus groups data, and the review of documents. Each of the interviews was audio recorded and transcribed accurately. The researchers then coded for themes among the responses, looking for chunks (Creswell, 2003). These chunks were placed in categories, which developed into emergent themes. CRT was used to identify themes related to race or suppression, to understand how they could be used to empower not only staff, but also parents and students. These themes were identified by carefully reviewing all transcripts, observation notes, document analysis notes, artifacts, as well as notes logged in by the researchers throughout the research. This offered one more opportunity for the researchers to seek consistency and triangulation (Creswell, 2003, Merriam, 1998).

Findings

The findings of this inquiry suggested strong impact on issues associated with Latino parent participation and awakening to self-reliance as a result of specific actions on the part of the principal. We found that changes in practices associated with the way the school was perceived by parents resulted in increased participation by Latino immigrant parents. Additionally, the data set found participants felt self-reliance to address those issues as a result of having been given voice and a sense of being welcomed in the school. The following themes emerged: 1) Institutional Receptivity that fosters parental involvement, with the subthemes of a) Building Relationships, and b) Change; and 2) Awakening to Self Reliance of the participants, with the subthemes of a) Building Capacity, b) Giving Voice, and c) Shared Responsibility. The way the two main themes evolved from the actions of the principal is depicted in Figure 1. These two themes are

related to the impact of having a principal who believes in empowering people, establishing relationships with the community within the school, and building capacity in both parents and staff.

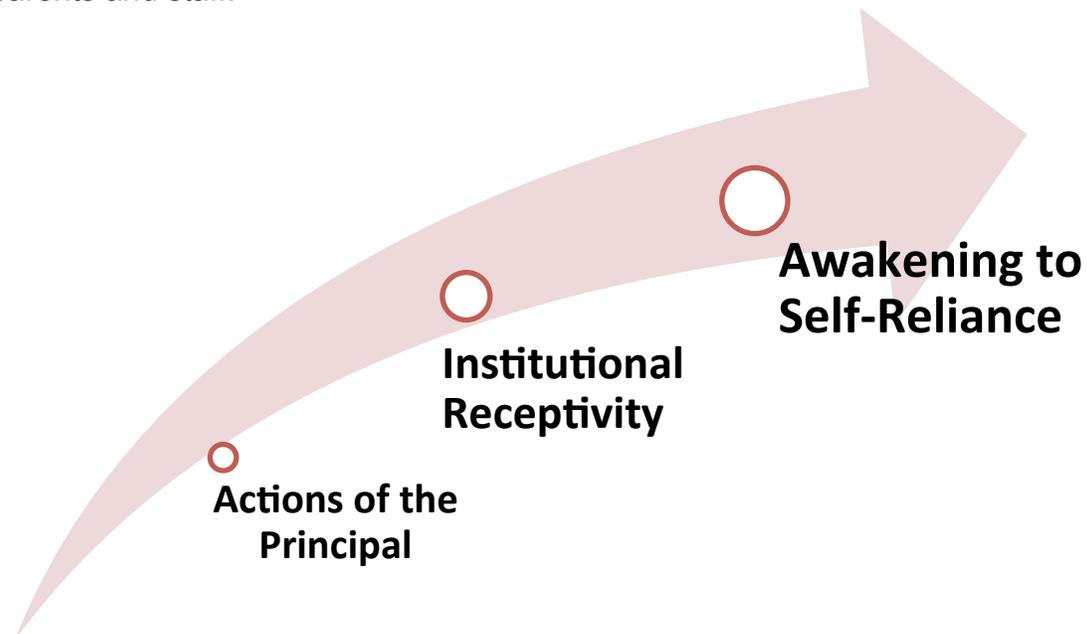


Figure 1: Impact of a principal's actions on the institution and parents and staff

Institutional Receptivity that fosters parental involvement

Within the theme of Institutional Receptivity, the principal and teachers talked about building relationships with parents and between principal and staff. The teachers interviewed discussed change, and how some people were initially resistant to it, referring to the fact that the principal came on board just a few years ago, and has demonstrated a different way of doing business. Teachers referred to this during the focus group, when one said: "The principal lets the teachers have a voice, in meetings we get to voice our opinions. It is not dictated. She allows our voice to be heard and our opinions count." Another teacher acknowledged that empowering people is not always easy. She said, "People are resistant to change. We are trying to figure out what she wants."

It was discussed that there is an open door policy in the school, which allows parents to have access to the principal and to the teachers and classrooms, without having to make an appointment. This policy was mentioned during the interviews with the principal, the secretary, and the teachers. The Latino parents also mentioned it, and one added that "it was not like that before this principal came on board."

When the principal was asked to reflect on how things had changed at the school in such a short period of time, she expressed:

I am not sure. I know that when I came here the parents were very kind; there was a group of parents, women, who were very kind. I think they were kind of testing the waters. They would come to the office and try to get a feel for me, because they were trying to figure me out as well. Can I

trust her? Am I welcome? Can I come to the office? Moreover, I knew from day one its open door, they come in, and I meet with them.

The principal also discussed how she addresses relationships with the parents, and how she approaches them, which aligns with the open door policy mentioned above:

Formal is not good, formal pushes people away, and I don't know if it is necessarily a culture thing, but I know here it would not work for our families. It may be a cultural thing, when things become more formal they become a little scary for people, especially when people are trying to navigate the system and not be very prominent in the system. They are lying low, and I do not ask questions. Everyone who comes in the building is welcome to be here, when it comes to the kids. We do not ask too personal questions. When it becomes formal, the parents start feeling uneasy. When we start asking too many questions, pointed questions, we get a little bit of a fear thing going on, and as I said, we are grassroots, if you start asking questions that also spreads. You have to be careful how you deal with situations. I had parents tell me they are not legal, but that is something I would never repeat.

The principal discussed the way she communicates with parents, teachers, and students, and the way she expects staff to communicate with parents and students. When discussing a particular situation at her school where parents were involved, she explained how she handled it to make sure that both staff and parents were comfortable:

... We talk about it, and we try to understand the situation, make sure that the child gets food during the day, and an extra snack during the day. The staff was very uncomfortable, and I have to relieve them. In time, things work out, but I do not come out with an iron fist on it. That is just not me, and it would not be beneficial to anyone. We gently, gentleness is very important, we gently say 'Hey, how is it going? Talk about the situation.

An example of how control has shifted from the administration to the parents was the occasion on which the school had to hire a Parent Liaison. Parents and teachers formed the interviewing committee with the principal participating but not having a vote. She let the parents know that it would be their decision. One of the parents reported that parents felt that their opinion was important when this happened, and that they had never been in a position to be the decision-makers. Another parent mentioned that the principal really trusted him or her to make the right decision. A comment made by the principal during her interview confirmed this:

Parents at our school are in charge. At our SAC meetings for example, I am not in charge, and I will say it to everybody. Parents are in charge. It is their meeting. The parent liaison assists with that, and will help with translation and making sure that things move along, but I do not do it. I do not. I sit back, and when they want me to talk about something, I stand up and talk.

This notion was buttressed by the teachers during the second focus group, when one of the younger teachers in the group, said, comparing how she was treated at another school because of her age, “At the other school I was always treated as a baby; as a young teacher, they would not let me decide. Here I always felt as being in charge.” Another teacher describes the principal as “very supportive, like an overseer. We are the leaders in our classroom; we are the boss in our rooms. It gives you the freedom to actually teach.”

Institutional or school receptivity is a comprehensive structure made up of the culture, physical environment, organizational structure, social relationships, and individual behaviors. “The culture reflects the organization’s values and beliefs, rituals, philosophy, norms of interaction, and expectations about the way things are done. The culture defines what is or is not possible within the organization.” (Kaplan & Evans, 1997, p. 1) The interaction mentioned above, which results in Institutional Receptivity is reflected in Figure 2.

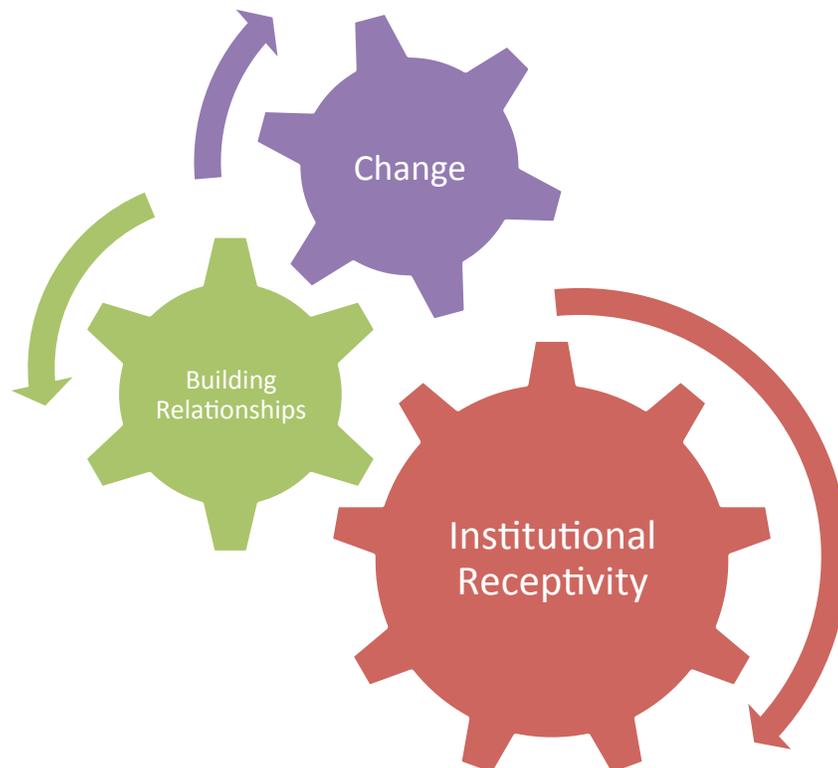


Figure 2: Institutional receptivity as a comprehensive structure

Awakening to Self-Reliance

The school principal addressed the theme of self-reliance when she mentioned the importance of having teachers and parents able to make decisions. She discussed her vision of empowering people and having them as a part of most of the decision making within the school setting. She also talked about how important it is to build relationships and let people know that you care about their concerns, opinions, and needs.

The staff at the Elementary School kept the communication channels with parents fluid, informal, and open at all times. Document analysis and interviews revealed that communication was important, not only for the principal, but also for teachers. The secretary also mentioned how she is available for translation if the teachers need to call a parent over the phone, and how teachers ask her to translate notes that need to go home almost daily. Document analysis also demonstrated that all communication to parents is in both languages. Along this line of keeping parents informed, the principal said,

We do a weekly progress report, which is huge, it wasn't happening before, and it's in English and Spanish. Those seem like little things but they are not. They tell the parent, your child's education is important, and we know that your child's education is important to you, so we are going to give you this information. That is empowering to the parents.

Parents show strong evidence of having found a voice, not only during the interview, but this was also evident during an observation of the SAC (School Advisory Committee) meeting and during analysis of documents. During the meeting the parents talked more than the school personnel present, and the Principal responded to their requests in a positive manner. Some of the documents that were available to the researchers were letters that the parents wrote, in Spanish, to Board Members, asking them to reconsider the boundary changes for school attendance, since it would result in families who had attended Martin Elementary (a pseudonym) for years having to move to another school. These letters were translated to English and attached to the translation prior to being sent to the Board of Directors of the School District. As a result of this petition, parents were given the choice to stay at the school.

The principal referred to actions like the one stated above as "bridging." She mentioned how she sees herself as a way for parents to have access to resources and people in the district and the larger community. One example was when the parents had concerns about certain needs at the school; the principal invited the superintendent to attend a meeting with them. Parents also mentioned this event during the parent interview. As one parent stated "Parents feel good because she takes us into account and responds to our needs and concerns, not just by listening, but with actions."

Along with giving voice, the principal believes in shared responsibility, and is adamant that all parents, regardless of language or national origin, educational background or socio economic status, are interested in the education of their children. As reflected in her recount of an incident:

I did have an instance last year. There were some concerns from teachers because there were gang members coming in the building. They were parents, but I had to explain to them that while they have children here. I cannot not welcome them, we must befriend them. They are going to be a part of us. They understood that. Everyone is still here; they understood that. Let's all be eyes and ears. We open our eyes. My approach was to welcome them to say, 'Hi, how is your child doing? Let us know how we can help.'" Those parents are still here too. Those parents are interested in their child's education just like every other parent.

The principal acknowledges that there are some stereotypes that she is still trying to eliminate. One of them is that if parents do not speak English they cannot help their children in school, or they are not interested in their education. Her goal is to educate her staff to understand that all parents care about their children's education, and that it is their charge to find ways to inform parents of what their children are learning and how they can help them at home, *even* if they do not speak English:

We have a couple [of teachers] who just do not get it. It is their way or the highway, and there are some stereotypes going on. One [teacher] is pretty new; another one has been here a couple of years. She just does not seem to know what to do; she just cannot get over the fact that "they don't speak English, so how are they going to help their child? They can't help their children." She can't get past that mindset, and that mindset holds her back sometimes in finding other strategies, other ways to connect with people.

When asked about what the school and teachers can do not only to build that relationship, but also to give parents the tools they need, the principal spoke about shared responsibility. She explained that it is the responsibility of the school not only to inform parents, but also to help them understand the responsibility that parents share with the school in the education of their children. It cannot be just the school educating their children, she said.

We do a lot of talking with parents about how the children can still read to them in English and that becomes a learning process for both, the child and the parents. We've noticed they have said, "Wow, we really like this," because they are learning, too, and it bridges relationships between parents and children. It's really amazing! What we have done is tried to figure out ways to help that bridge [to] happen. We are continually trying to find ways to help that happen. Little by little we try to do these things, like sending things home in English and Spanish, are some ways that we have tried to bridge that.

Shared responsibility goes along with building capacity. During the interview, the principal mentioned several times the fact that part of her responsibility as a principal is to build capacity in the school, with teachers, students, and parents. She sees building capacity as shifting control from the principal to a shared control with parents and teachers, so that, when, or if, she leaves, they can continue making decisions, participating, and having their voice heard:

Letting go of the control is huge, and it scares people. Parents run the parent meeting here, not me, but I have my input. When I talk to other principal friends, they can't believe that I do this. They ask 'How do you have any control of what goes on?', and I say 'It happens.' I have my input, they have their input, and it happens the way it needs to happen. They run the agenda by me before the meeting. It is harder for people to let go than to take control. And it's not like I throw my hands up and don't know what is going on. I see what they have planned and if I have something to add I let them know. My parents run their

meeting. I just know that I knew I had to get parents involved. I knew I could not be the boss. It doesn't work for me.

In addition, she transferred this same attitude to her teachers. Teachers mentioned that they themselves felt that the principal heard their voices and they were given a voice by their opinion being counted. They also talked about how the principal listened to parents and the concerns they had. One of the teachers said, "We get buy in. She takes action based on your opinions. I have seen her be like that with parents and students. She gives the opportunity in having a say on what works best for them." During the teacher interview, one of the teachers mentioned how this was hard for some staff members, because they were used to being told what to do.

This strong feeling of letting people take charge and responsibility was observed by the researchers during one of the parent meetings, and was summed up in the principal's explanation of what parental involvement is:

Parental involvement for me is a priority here at our school. In my opinion, we cannot function effectively as a school without parental involvement. We need everybody on board, everybody participating in each student's education, the school, and especially the parents, because when the student leaves here they need to go home to a place where the parents know how to help them and also to where they feel that education is important. And for many, many of our parents that I talk to or that I know because I talk to other teachers, for these parents education is very important.

Regardless of how much formal power any one person has in a school community, "all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 40). One important aspect to organizational success is the need for decisions affecting students to be made collaboratively. To be successful, collaborative efforts must include persons and organizations beyond the walls of the school (Beyer & Ruhl-Smith, 1998; Bird, 2006; Ingram et al., 2007; Lambert, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2000; Novak, 2006; Smith & Reynolds, 1998). The manifestation of Awakening to Self-Reliance as the interaction of voice, building capacity, and shared responsibility is depicted below in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Awakening to self-reliance in the form of giving voice, building capacity and shared responsibility

The interaction of these three factors that contributed to Awakening to Self-Reliance also demonstrates how an effective leader should not be labeled by only one of the definitions of leadership styles that were discussed before. An effective leader is able to move from one leadership style to another, selecting the behaviors from each style that best fits the situation at the time. An effective leader does not fit into one of these styles in a permanent way, but is able to shift the style to match the needs of the institution. This principal was able to select behaviors from different leadership styles, and incite this awakening to self-reliance in parents and staff. The conclusions based on the study findings, showing the effect of a principal’s actions on the parental involvement of Latino immigrant parents, through an awakening to self-reliance and institutional receptivity, are represented below in Figure 4.

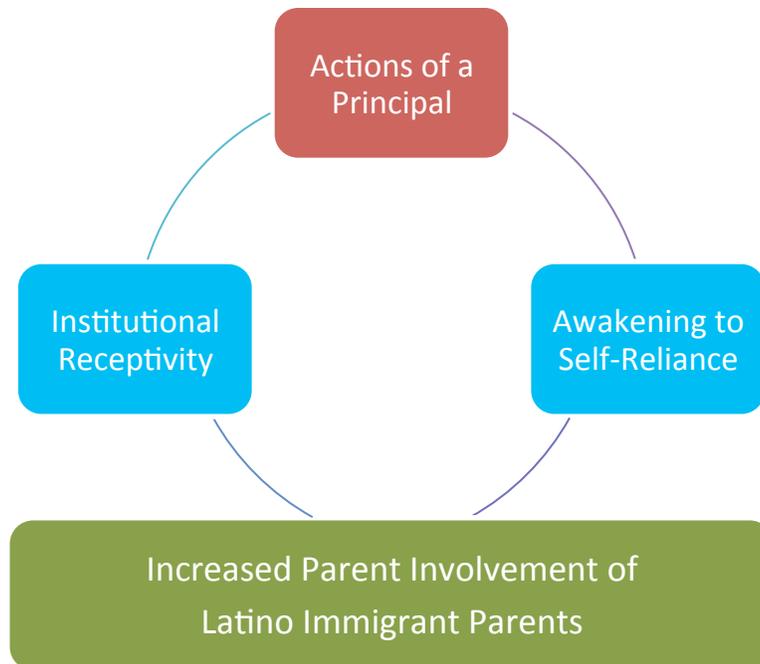


Figure 4: Conclusions based on study findings.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this research for application in urban education could also impact rural and suburban school districts, as they address the issues of diversity in face of a growing Latino population all over the country. The study findings revealed the importance of being deliberate and purposeful and understanding the impact that parent involvement, regardless of ethnicity or national origin, has on student achievement in particular, and school success in general. These findings supported Freire's (2000) educational initiatives that transformed schools into spaces ready to receive the local community's culture and knowledge. In this elementary school, the content and process of these principles allowed parents to recognize that they could, indeed, effect changes at a personal and social level. It also brought to light a new social consciousness, whereby everyone could participate as a functional citizen (Freire, 2000).

The study findings also discovered the importance of empowering teachers with resources necessary to establish an institutional receptivity for giving voice to parents, especially the marginalized. We found awakening to self-reliance came from a welcoming setting (Institutional Receptivity), building relationships, and open communication. An unintended positive finding was the awakening to self-reliance of teachers who benefitted from the same strategies that the principal used in all her interactions.

Furthermore, findings suggest that Institutional Receptivity and Awakening to Self-Reliance are essential to giving voice to the marginalized. The parents and staff interviewed described change in school practices and policies, the need for parents to be welcomed in the school and classrooms, the importance of parents' input and participation, and the need for a safe space for parents to practice that newly found ability. Additionally, the staff and parents who participated in this study attributed this

new sense of self-reliance and capacity to the principal who addressed the needs of parents and gave them voice, providing a “bridge” to other resources and community capital. However, other questions were raised that suggested the need for future study such as the question about whether alternative leadership positions in the greater community (inside/outside the school) may encourage parents’ participation. Consequently, a recommendation for further study includes the consideration of alternative leadership positions in the greater community that may encourage participation in school by Latino immigrant parents.

Notes on contributors:

Alicia Miguel is the director of ESL in the Kansas City, Kansas public school district. She has presented internationally on ESL issues, and urban leadership. She graduated with her Doctor of Education Leadership and Policy Analysis degree from the University of Missouri.

Barbara N. Martin is a professor in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Department at the University of Central Missouri. She has presented and published internationally on the topics of Social Justice Leadership, Learning and Technology, and Mentoring.

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