



THE EDUCATIONAL  
**Forum**

# Dispelling Myths about Latino Parent Participation in Schools

by Alice M. L. Quijcho and Annette M. Daoud

## **Abstract**

*This qualitative study was conducted to discuss and dispel commonly held myths about Latino parents' involvement in their children's education. Differences between teacher perceptions of Latino parent involvement and parents' understanding of their roles in supporting their children's education—including the learning and use of the English language—were explored. Results indicated that some teachers held negative perceptions of Latino parents. The study also revealed that Latino parents had high expectations of their children's academic achievement and wanted to be more involved in their education, but felt excluded from the school community.*

Having high expectations for all students to perform well academically is an indicator of a successful school. On the other hand, if a school does not have high expectations for all students, subgroups of students may not be academically successful. Diaz (2001, 47) noted:

*Culturally diverse communities have been told through overt and covert avenues that they are not as good as White students and will not do as well because of their background. They overhear teachers say things like, 'Well, you can't expect anything from these children. Their parents don't care and they come from transient families.'*

This inquiry examined two schools in large unified school districts in southern California where teachers, administrators, and school staff members had low expectations of Latino children and their parents. The contradictions between the expectations, opinions, and perceptions that schools have developed about Latino parents, and the stark reality of what Latino parents want and do to support the academic development

of their children were examined. Two main questions guided this study: "What perceptions do teachers of English learners (ELs) have about Latino parent involvement?" and "How do Latino parents of ELs see themselves in relation to the school?"

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The results of this study challenged popular, yet negative, perceptions of Latino parents and their participation in their children's education, including:

- Latino parents are responsible for the ills of low-performing schools.
- Declining student performance, as measured by state standardized test scores, is due solely to the changing faces in the neighborhood.
- Low student performance is the result of an influx of uneducated families who are not supportive of and do not care about their children's education.

- Latino parents do not participate in the life of the school and, thus, do not contribute positively to it.
- Latino immigrant and migrant parents do not have high academic standards.

Based on the study's findings, suggestions for working collaboratively with Latino parents to dispel negative and inaccurate beliefs about Latino parents are provided.

### *Literature Review*

Latino parents' attitudes toward their children's education, including their hopes for their children's futures, the misunderstanding of their participation, and suggestions for improving their involvement, have been the subject of a great deal of research.

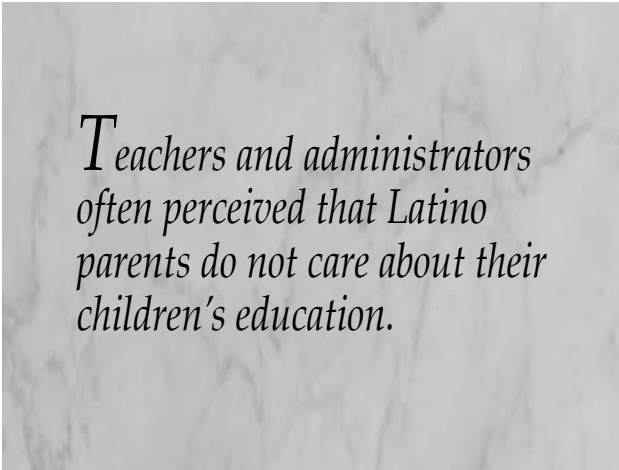
Many researchers have found that Latino parents have high expectations for their children's education and want to participate in their academic success (e.g., Trueba 1988; Moles 1993; Delgado-Gaitán 1994; Valdés 1996; Ada and Zubizarreta 2001; and Nieto 2004). In their research with parents in seven states over a period of 28 years, Ada and Zubizarreta (2001) consistently found that parents of immigrant students had high hopes for their children's success in a new country. Parents wanted to actively support and participate in their children's education and moral development. They expressed a desire for developing cooperative social values and an interest in collaborating with schools to help their children succeed. Parents wanted their children to learn English; however, they expressed a desire for their children to maintain their home language and culture as a way of supporting and maintaining family ties (Ada and Zubizarreta 2001).

These findings contrast starkly with the perceptions many teachers and administrators have of Latino parent involvement in their children's education. Teachers and administrators often perceived that Latino parents do not care about their children's education (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001; Valdés 1996). These opinions may be rooted in broader perceptions many members of society have of immigrants. Immigrants who are culturally different and do not speak English are not viewed positively by many Americans. For these people, immigrants instilled "anxieties about 'losing control' of our society, our language, and our economy" (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001, 37). These anxieties were fueled by powerful assumptions and concerns about immigrants and their roles in American society, especially the effect large-scale immigration would have on the economy. Economic concerns ranged from immigrants overburdening the system by using publicly funded assistance programs to immigrants taking away jobs from U.S. citizens (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001).

Another concern Americans had is that the children of immigrants either can not or will not assimilate into American culture. According to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001, 39), assimilation is defined as "learning English, getting a good job, and settling down." Though immigrant parents wanted their children to have a better life than their own, they also wanted them to maintain their native culture and identity, which can be perceived as not assimilating into American culture. Immigrant parents understood that due to culture maintenance, their children may face discrimination at school, but believed the education they receive will be the "best hedge against discrimination" (Gibson 1991, 361).

Both of these concerns are based more on assumptions than on facts. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) found that nearly all the children they interviewed wanted to learn English. Getting a good job and settling down also were goals for most of these immigrant children.

Many of these negative assumptions were dispelled when teachers had a first-hand understanding of their Latino students' families. Teachers who visited the homes of their students and took the time to learn about their families changed their perceptions about Latino families and the contributions parents make to the education of their children (Moll et al. 1992).



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Latino parents often misunderstood their role in their children's education because they didn't understand the concept of involvement as defined by the school (Valdés 1996). Latino parents only can meet an expectation of being involved in their children's education if schools explicitly define what involvement entails. Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) studied a workshop series offered to Latino parents in a large urban school district in California. During these workshops, parents focused on topics such as home-school collaboration,

academic standards, and how the school system worked. After attending the workshops, Latino parents became more active in their children's education by initiating more contacts with teachers, attending more parent conferences and workshops, and offering greater support for reading and homework (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001).

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Latino parent involvement should be customized to specific families and their community and to the specialized schooling needs of their children. In their work with two elementary schools in California, Quezada, Diaz, and Sanchez (2003) found that parent involvement commonly included conducting home visits, sending information home in English and Spanish, and asking parents for their input regarding scheduling meetings and workshops. Berzins and López (2001) found that

opportunities to communicate with parents occurred by providing them with choices, by sending home monthly bilingual letters, and by preparing homework folders that support their children's learning. Keeping parents informed about homework may require accommodations such as using audio tapes for parents who are nonreaders or home-based literacy programs. Such accommodations helped Latino parents know what they can do to support their children's education and become involved in their schooling (Berzins and López 2001). Explaining to Latino parents what involvement is, how it is done, and how it benefits their children helped alleviate misunderstandings.

### ***Methodology***

The study was conducted during the 2000–2001 academic year at two elementary schools (K–5) in southern California. One school was located in a coastal community; the other in an inland town. The study recounted experiences of teachers, students, and parents involved in the two schools' educational programs and their effectiveness on the academic achievement of English learners. Both schools had been identified as underperforming by the California Department of Education as defined by low standardized test scores. The standardized test used at the time of the inquiry, the Stanford Achievement Test or SAT-9, was a content-based test administered each spring to all students in California. Some EL students were exempt from taking the test if their parents opted to exclude them, or if they had resided in the United States for less than 30 months at the time the test was administered.

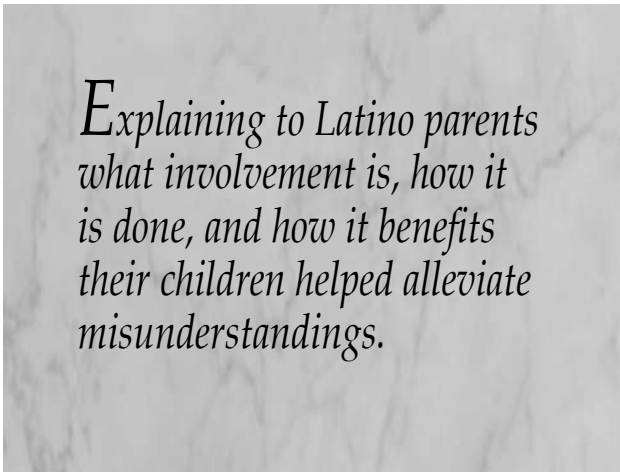
Both schools were located in unified school districts where grade levels ranged from kindergarten to 12th grade. The first school, School A, was on a year-round schedule with three groups of students in attendance while one group was on intersession. The second school, School B, observed a traditional school-year calendar commencing in September and ending in June. Both schools served diverse student populations. At the time of the

study, School A had an enrollment of 976 students. Of the total enrollment, 647 students participated in the standardized testing process. School A had a transitional bilingual program, with an EL population of 343 or 35 percent of the total school population. All but one of the ELs spoke Spanish as their native language. School B had an enrollment of 501 students, of which 313 were actively involved in the standardized testing process. All instruction at School B was delivered in English. School B had an EL population of 231 or 46 percent of the entire school population, all of whom spoke Spanish as their native language.

Data was collected primarily through interviews and observations, with Latino parents of children at both schools serving as the primary data sources. The parents had volunteered to serve as members of a school advisory board, and met with teachers and assessors to develop a tentative plan to improve the curriculum and services students received at both schools. The Latino parents who participated on the advisory boards also volunteered in their children's classrooms and, therefore, had ongoing contact with school personnel.

Public meetings were held at both school sites to involve a greater number of Latino parents in discussions on improving the curriculum and student services. At School A, 250 Latino parents attended the public meeting to share their perspectives and concerns. The school community had expected only about 30 parents to attend the meeting; consequently, there were scarcely enough translators to listen to and communicate parental comments.

The public meeting at School B had an attendance of 80 parents, 75 of whom were Spanish-speaking Latino parents. An adequate number of translators were present at the meeting to help attendees understand what was said in both English and Spanish.



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Interviews were conducted with Latino parents, as well as with teachers, administrators, and classified staff members (custodians, instructional assistants, and secretaries). Much of the data reported in this study was collected at School A, since its population was comparatively larger than School B's. At School A, 50 Latino parents were interviewed, compared to 20 parents at School B. Seventy-five teachers and 10 instructional aides were interviewed at School A. At School B, three teachers, six instructional aides, three cafeteria workers, and two office secretaries were interviewed. The majority of interviews conducted in the schools were with teachers; consequently, the responses reported in the findings section primarily represent teachers' responses. In addition to interviews, observations of at least 20 minutes in length occurred at both schools in classrooms with English learners.

Teachers and parents were asked 10 questions in the interview process. Questions focused on parent participation and perceived obstacles to student achievement. Questions were modified slightly when asked to either teachers or parents to best address the needs of each audience. For example, teachers were asked, "How can we improve parent participation at this school?" and "What do you see as the obstacles to the academic progress of students?" Parents were asked, "How can parental participation be improved?" and "What do you see as the obstacles to your child's academic progress?" The frequency of responses to each question was used as a basis for identifying themes across the interviews. Parent and teacher responses were compared to determine how often themes were discussed by each group.

### ***Results: Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Involvement***

**Teachers' perceptions.** Interviews at both schools indicated that teachers, administrators, and classified staff members perceived minimal involvement by Latino parents in their children's education. The following comments were the most common and frequent responses to the question "How can we improve parent participation at this school?"

*They don't come to school to help in the classroom. We try, but we just can't get them here.*

*They don't and can't help in the classrooms.*

*They are illiterate.*

*They don't help their children with homework.*

*They don't make sure their children complete their homework every night.*

*They take their children to Mexico for almost anything throughout the school year and keep them away from school for weeks. How can the children learn this way?*

*This neighborhood and this school have really changed. This used to be a good neighborhood. The professional people moved and now we have this influx of Mexicans.*

*They just don't care as much as the other parents do.*

The second question, which addressed obstacles to student success, was "What do you see as the obstacles to the academic progress of students?" Responses included:

*Parents don't help them with their homework.*

*Parents don't speak English, so they can't help.*

*Kids leave for vacations and they don't do any work we assign when they are gone.*

*Children don't work as hard as the other students. The students start from a different place in literacy.*

Several themes emerged from teacher interviews. The first theme was the belief that Latino parents not only were unreliable, but they refused to volunteer in the classroom. The second theme was that Latino parents did not support the school's homework policy because they would not help their children with homework. Speaking Spanish was perceived as a barrier for parents to help their children academically. The third theme centered on the perception that Latino parents did not care about schooling. For example, Latino parents took their children out of school for family trips. This practice translated into the

perception that Latino parents did not value education as much as other parents. The fourth theme that emerged was that Latino parents were unskilled and unprofessional. Parents were referred to as the Mexicans whose children were different and came to school with deficient literacy skills.

**Parents' perceptions.** At School A, a small group of Spanish-speaking parents understood the workings of the school and were attuned to terms used to describe student learning. When asked how the school's curriculum could be improved, they understood the question and responded immediately. They stated that they wanted their children to receive the same services and content instruction other children in the school received. They particularly were concerned that the curriculum focused on literacy and learning to speak English, while neglecting the content areas of science and social studies. Spanish-speaking parents further noted that their own classroom observations revealed that not all students in the school were receiving science instruction. Parents emphatically requested that their children receive access to grade-level science instruction.

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Parents were asked questions about the curriculum, how they felt they could best support their children, and ways to improve the school. Specifically, the questions were "How can parental participation be improved?" and "What are the obstacles to your child's academic progress?" Each question and its responses are provided in Spanish and English. The Spanish responses are verbatim and have not been revised or edited. In some cases, elaborations of the parents' comments have been added.

**Question #1.** *¿Qué podemos hacer para aumentar y mejorar la participación de los padres de familia en [la escuela A]?* What can we do to improve parent participation at School A?

*Mejor comunicación entre los maestros/as y padres. [Better or improved communication between teachers and parents.]*

*Talleres profesionales para ayudar a los padres a que mejor ayuden a sus niños/as. [Workshops that help parents understand children's school work (and assignments).]*

*Asegurar que los padres entiendan las tareas de los niños/as. [Make sure that parents understand the work children are assigned (at home and at school).]*

*Fijar conferencias con los padres cada dos meses. [Schedule conferences with parents every two months.]*

*Invitación personal o por teléfono. [Personally invite parents (to come to school activities or to conferences) through phone calls.]*

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*Utilizar las palabras como urgente o importante. [Use words such as urgent or important (when contacting parents about school matters).]*

*El maestro tiene que ser más amistosos y accesibles. [Teacher has to be more friendly and accessible.]*

**Question #2.** ¿Cuáles son los obstáculos que se interponen en el aprendizaje o en el éxito del estudiante? What are some obstacles encountered in the learning and success of your student?

*Muchos substitutos. [Too many substitutes.]* Additional comments indicated that students, especially younger students, experienced inconsistencies when there were substitutes and that they identified more closely with their classroom teachers.

*Falta de ayuda a la escuela. [Lack of help at school (for students with their work).] Falta de ayuda en las tareas en casa. [Lack of help with homework at home (on the part of parents who either weren't confident about helping or couldn't help because they did not understand the work).]*

*Transición de Español al Inglés sin apoyo. [Transition from Spanish to English without help (additional help to facilitate completing school work in Spanish to English).]*

*Consistencia en los grados que dan los maestros. [Consistency in the grades students receive from the teachers.]*

*Exceso de televisión en casa y escuela. [An excess of television at home and in school.]*

*Falta de responsabilidades de los padres. [Parents not accepting their responsibilities (to support their children's academic achievement).]*

*Falta de instrucción en las ciencias. [Lack of instruction in the sciences.]*

*Más atención y paciencia del maestro para los niños. [More attention and patience from the teacher with students.]*

*Confusión a los niños cuando hay dos maestras en un contrato. [Students are confused when they have two teachers.]* At one of the schools, two teachers shared a yearly contract. One teacher was present for half of the school year and the other teacher for the other half. Parents felt that this inconsistency confused children.

*Cumplir promesas a los estudiantes (por ejemplo: llevar al niño al McDonald's o a otro lugar por sus logros académicos y buen ciudadano). [Keep your promises to students (for example, take them to McDonald's or to other places when they have done well academically).]* Parents felt that whenever promises were made to children for improved behavior or academic achievement, they should be kept.

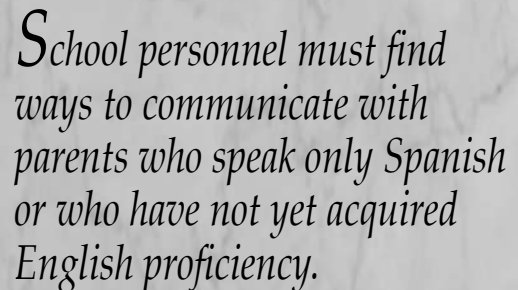
*Para mejorar el éxito de nuestros hijos una recomendación sería que cada uno de los maestros se enfocara en cada uno de los alumnos. Por ejemplo, si el niño está atrasado en lectura entonces dar tarea los fines de semana o en matemáticas lo mismo pero cada alumno tener la ayuda en lo que están atrasados. [To improve student success, one recommendation would be for each teacher to focus on each of the students. For example, if a student is deficient in reading or mathematics, give work during the weekend. Each student should receive help in the area in which he or she is deficient.]*



Latino parents' responses highlighted what they thought were perceived obstacles to the academic achievement of their children. Parents understood that not all children received support with their schoolwork at home. Consequently, they did not just find fault with the schools. They admitted that in some homes, children watched too much television and did not focus enough on schoolwork. However, the parents observed that children watched a lot of television at school as well. Parents also expressed concerns that teachers broke their promises to children in terms of material rewards for their successes. For example, children were promised a field trip as a reward for academic success, but the promise was not kept. In their classroom observations, parents stated that they saw children waving their hands in the air waiting for the teacher's help, but their pleas went unanswered. Parents wanted teachers to exhibit more patience with their children, pay more attention to them in school, and help them with their work.

Help for their children and themselves, improved communication between the school and the home, respect for their children, access to the core or grade-level curriculum, and partnerships with schools were themes that emerged from the interviews with parents.

The first theme, help for their children and themselves, focused on how parents wanted their children to receive help in school to learn academic content. They did not want their children to ask for help and then receive no response from teachers. For themselves, parents wanted help in understanding the assignments their children were given. The second theme—improved communication—showed that parents wanted to receive timely and frequent communication. They wanted to know about the work their children were doing, when conferences were held, how important the conferences were, and to have more teacher-parent conferences. The third theme centered on parents' desires that teachers respect their children. This was evident by parents saying they wanted teachers to be friendlier, to respect their children, and to keep promises made to the students. The fourth theme addressed access to the core curriculum. Parents wanted their children to receive content instruction in the areas of science and social studies. As one parent said, "I want the singing and the drawing to stop." This parent noted that when Spanish-speaking and English-speaking students were both involved in a group activity, they were either doing art projects or singing songs. At the same time, English-speaking students in other classrooms were receiving science instruction. The fifth theme focused on partnering with schools to support student learning. Parents wanted access to books in Spanish so they could help their children understand school assignments taught in English only.



*School personnel must find ways to communicate with parents who speak only Spanish or who have not yet acquired English proficiency.*

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Parents understood that they had to assume responsibility for their children's academic success. They wanted their children to receive an education that was both equitable and socially just. They asked why their children did not receive instruction in grade-level content areas such as science and social studies. They wanted their children to receive the same instruction other children received and be held to the same expectations as other children. However, they wanted their children to receive appropriate support to facilitate learning. Some parents asked why books in Spanish were not available to parents. They noted that with these tools they could review the material being taught and help their children understand the content. Parents asked to be partners with the schools, indicating their desire to help their children be successful. These parents cared about the academic achievement of their children.

The messages from Latino parents were clear. Teach our children the content you teach other students. Expect that our children will achieve, and make sure you support their achievement. Help them when they need academic help. Make them feel like members of the school community by seeing their faces, understanding their personalities, and valuing their needs. Parents felt that the schools were not offering their children a quality education, and they wanted the schools to be accountable for that. At one school, the teachers and administrators were offended by the candidness of parents and placed Spanish-speaking parents with English-only speaking adults (teachers and other parents) at subsequent meetings. This effectively silenced the voices and additional concerns of Spanish-speaking parents.

**Comparing themes.** Table 1 compares the perceptions of teachers about parent participation and obstacles to student success with those of Latino parents.

**Table 1. Parent Participation and Obstacles to Student Learning: Perceptions of Teachers and Latino Parents**

<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Parents</b>
Parents unreliable/won't volunteer	X	
Parental help with homework	X	X
Parents concerned about schooling	X	X
Perceived status of parents (unprofessional)	X	
Parents help students learn		X
Importance of communication	X	X
Respect for students		X
Student access to the core curriculum		X
Partners in learning	X	X

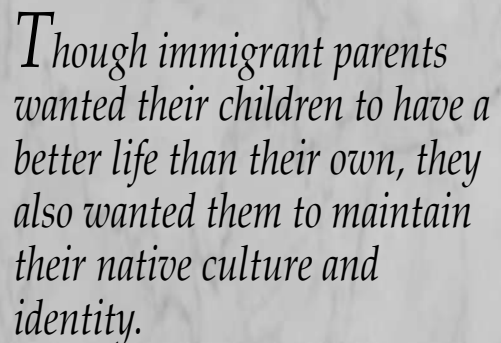
The trends that emerged from classroom observations suggested that teachers and administrators did not clearly see the realities of English learners' lives in the same light as

their parents saw them. The trends and responses from this study supported the research of Ada and Zubizarreta (2001) and others that showed that Latino parents care about the education of their children and want to actively participate in their academic success. This study also showed that though parents wanted their children to learn English, they expressed a desire to maintain their home language and culture to support and sustain family ties (Ada and Zubizarreta 2001).

### ***How Myths Can Be Dispelled***

At Schools A and B, school personnel began to dispel myths about Latino parents when they were confronted with data that more accurately represented reality. Two factors helped staff members at the schools to understand that the perceptions they had about Latino parents were flawed. First, school personnel were impressed by Spanish-speaking parents' level of articulate participation in the school-wide planning group. Second, the sheer number of Latino parents who participated in the public meetings was considerable. Their presence and participation sent a positive message to school personnel.

At both schools, data suggested that strong, consistent parental leadership and participation was necessary to support students who speak languages other than English at school. Because immigrant and migrant parents are busy raising their families and making a living in a new country, leadership can be shared between several parents who communicate with one another on a regular basis. Parents felt schools should make a commitment to hire a community liaison to work with parents and articulate concerns about their children's schooling. A community liaison would make parents feel more comfortable coming to school and knowing with whom to speak. Parents at both schools noted, "There should always be someone in the school office, besides a secretary, who can talk to parents."



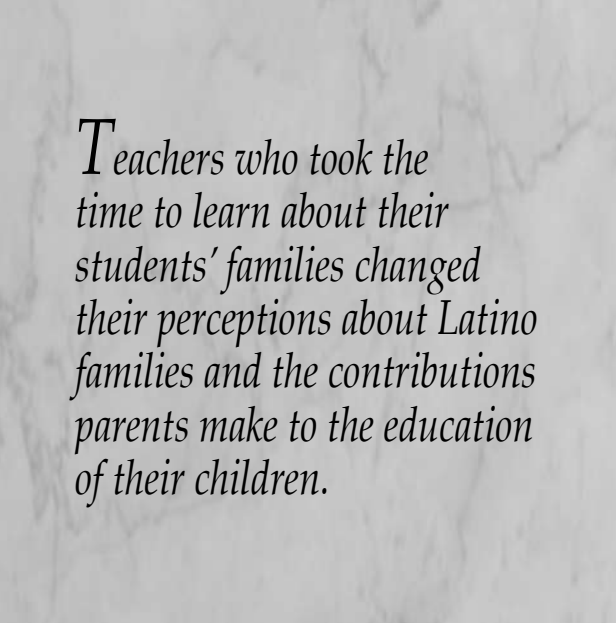
*Though immigrant parents wanted their children to have a better life than their own, they also wanted them to maintain their native culture and identity.*

Finally, interviews and observations suggested that staff members at Schools A and B should listen to parents' voices. School personnel must find ways to communicate with parents who speak only Spanish or who have not yet acquired English proficiency. Latino parents at both schools wanted a Spanish-speaking employee in the front office with whom they could communicate. Parents at one school noted that all materials sent home should be translated into Spanish so that parents could understand.

Data from this study also suggested that the location of meetings may increase Latino parent participation. It was recommended that school personnel periodically hold meetings in the local community to discuss parents' support of their children's education. As a

comparative example, a principal from a community that served two Indian reservations noted that parent participation and open lines of communication improved when meetings were alternately held on the reservation and at school. It seems logical that a similar model would work with immigrant and migrant parents. As Berzins and López (2001) found in their study, real opportunities to communicate with parents can be created.

This research study corroborated previous studies which clearly indicated that Latino



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parents care about and are supportive of their children's academic progress. School personnel must view students and their parents who come from different cultures as gifts and strengths. In Valdés's (2001) study of middle-school immigrant students, she discussed one student's transformation when he changed schools. He moved from a school that viewed his bilingualism and home culture as a negative to one where these factors were considered gifted starting points. He was provided access to the core curriculum along with appropriate academic support. The student blossomed, achieved academically, and integrated smoothly into the social life of the middle school.

Perceptions about parents and students must change. As Lao Tse observed (in Ioga 1995) in 604 B.C.E.:

*Go to the people. Learn from them, live with them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build on what they have. The best of leaders are those when the job is done, when the task is accomplished, the people will say, 'We have done it ourselves.'*

Are we willing to learn from the people and do the work that must be done to create an educational system that is socially just and where high expectations for everyone are sustained by culturally and linguistically appropriate support?

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