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<https://doi.org/10.7275/015g-nk50> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/1222

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PUERTO RICAN PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT
IN THEIR CHILDREN'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:
A MULTICULTURAL CASE STUDY

A Dissertation Presented

by

LUIS C. TURRIAGO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 1995

School of Education

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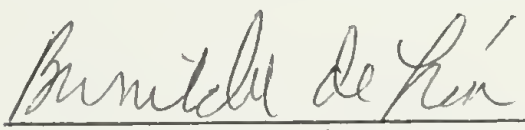
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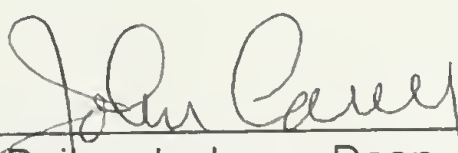
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This dissertation is dedicated to
my mother Elvira, my late father Luis Antonio,
my wife Debra and my daughter Nora Yemayá.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to express my gratitude to the twelve participants who so generously participated in this study, who opened their hearts and doors and allowed me to listen to their stories about their involvement in their children's elementary school. I also wish to thank the school principal for his support, interest and collaboration in this research project. I look forward to strengthening our professional relationship and continuing our conversations about the educational issues related to our people.

I would also like to thank my committee. I have felt valued and respected throughout the dissertation process. John C. Carey has helped me to develop a professional vision and voice in the field. Jay has taught and challenged me during my years as a graduate student. As a professor and advisor, Jay has the ability to bring out the best in me. Thank you for your trust and honesty. Robert S. Feldman has given me guidance and encouragement during this process. He motivated me to focus on issues related to psychology and education. Brunilda De León has been a pivotal force and excellent role model, for me as well as other Latinos in the program and on this campus. She has provided me with a number of academic opportunities and also encouraged me to do presentations about counseling and educational issues related to the Puerto Rican community.

I would like to thank Edward McCreanor for his help with the library work and his emotional and fraternal support. Ed is the fastest library consultant in Amherst and has been there for me and my family throughout this wonderful and lengthy process.

I would like to thank some friends for their support and faith in me. Edison Santana and Bram Haver, thank you for your kind words of encouragement and support, especially during the rough times. I really value our friendship.

My family in Colombia also provided support in many ways, despite the distance. I extend my thanks to my sisters, Elba, Nancy and Gladys, and to my brothers, Hernán, Antonio and Orlando. I am forever appreciative of my parents, Elvira and Luis, for teaching and sharing with me their dreams and hopes which helped my educational goals and allowed me to take the family name to new educational frontiers and horizons. Gracias Elvira for your wisdom and guidance in my life and my educational achievements; you have always been my best and favorite teacher.

Gracias to Nora Yemayá, who constantly with her little but powerful presence serves as a reminder of what really matters and is important in life. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife and academic companion Debra, who continues to love and inspire me in so many ways. Deb, you have brought love, light and inspiration to my journey. Gracias for helping me to rediscover my ability to smile and to have fun. Gracias for being so patient, so wonderful in all these years. I will always be there for you, amada mía.

school. Using a case study qualitative method, data was gathered through in-depth interviews with twelve Puerto Rican parents. A triangulation strategy was used for the data analysis in the search for patterns, categories and themes among participants' responses.

There were four major findings in this study. It was found that Puerto Rican parents want to be involved in their children's school, and that they want to know about their rights in the school. It was found that Puerto Rican parents have positive attitudes about their children's school, teachers and communication. It was also found that Puerto Rican parents are proud of their cultural background. In addition, it was found that Puerto Rican parents current lack of involvement in their children's school is related to numerous obstacles, including their responsibility to nuclear and extended family, conflict with schedules, and personal safety. Suggestions for multicultural counselors and educators to develop culturally-appropriate interventions to foster parents' school involvement and to take into account their specific needs such as language issues, rights and responsibilities, personal safety and transportation are presented.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

American public education is failing to educate minority students, especially students of Hispanic heritage. Because of this, the need to respond to the educational needs of Hispanic students has received increasing attention at the local and national levels in recent years (Rivera & Nieto, 1993; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1990). Although Hispanic educational attainment has increased and improved during the past decade, the educational gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanics continues to widen. For instance, compared to Blacks and Whites, Hispanics enter school later, leave earlier and are less likely to complete high school and enter or complete college. Further, the proportion of Hispanics with low educational attainment -- less than a fifth-grade education -- in 1993 was more than fourteen times greater than that of non-Hispanic Whites' 0.8 percent (Montgomery, 1994).

Educators and social scientists over the past two decades have given significant attention to minority students' low achievement scores and high dropout rates. The academic achievement scores for Hispanics and Blacks remain lower than those of White students (National Council of La Raza, 1991). Nicolau and Valdivieso (1993) have indicated that many Hispanic children are "written off" by the fourth grade when school work shifts from simply learning the basics into more complex, sophisticated application of these skills. At this point, those who have not mastered the basic skills are traditionally left behind. If they are not tracked earlier they will be now, beginning an educational journey that

sooner or later may end in an early exit from the school and the educational system. Many Hispanic youngsters for the first time are geared to experience the frustration and loss of self-esteem that make the educational experience an alien and painful one. The National Council of La Raza (1990) reported that three out of four Hispanic eighth graders cannot pass a test of simple mathematical operations using decimals or fractions. In all Hispanic subgroups, eighth graders are far more likely to score below the basic level than at the advanced level in math. In addition, the NCLR indicates that the lack of Hispanic role models among school personnel, inadequate resource allocation, and the lack of appropriate programs to meet language needs and involve parents are factors that contribute to students leaving school.

These factors have a powerful impact on Hispanic students' school performance and their high dropout rates, since they are closely related to students' socioeconomic status and family background (Nieto & Frau-Ramos, 1993). These factors in themselves do not explain the reasons for dropping out, but rather seek to describe the conditions under which Hispanic students leave school. For example, at the beginning of the tenth grade is when the school conditions and academic and individual realities (lack of academic skills, poor motivation, pregnancy, low self-esteem, peers, etc.) foster the exodus of Hispanic students from the public schools. Nearly 40 percent drop out because they are doing so poorly and are already one or more years overage for their grade. Hispanic students fail grades early and are held back and placed in remedial courses; many will never catch up (Curiel, 1991).

The Hispanic dropout phenomenon needs to be viewed as a serious social and educational problem. Our society can no longer ignore this

phenomenon, since it is associated with increased expenditures in social welfare and costly training programs (Fine, 1986; Spring, 1991). Leaving school without a diploma has negative individual and social costs, and is associated with limited opportunities that hinder the economic and social well-being of our nation as a whole. As American society continues to develop into a highly technological society, new skills and knowledge will be required in order to perform the jobs available. Current Hispanic students' performance may be insufficient to meet the demands that will be placed on them as they move to higher levels of schooling or into the workplace. Lacking the educational opportunities to develop their academic knowledge and skills, Hispanics will find it difficult to obtain decent employment in the computerized society of the future (Brown & Swanson, 1985; Collison, 1988).

Clearly, there is a need to respond to the above challenges. Currently, public schools are under pressure to demonstrate improved quality and educational strategies that may answer to the educational needs of minority students. In their search for solutions, educators and social scientists have cited parental involvement as a key factor and basic ingredient in improving the education of minority students (Ascher, 1988; Atkinson & Juntunen, 1994; Carrasquillo, 1991; Casas & Furlong, 1994; Colbert, 1991; Comer, 1988; Epstein, 1988; Chavkin, 1993; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Pedersen & Carey, 1994).

Minority parental involvement has also been and continues to be a concern of multicultural counselors and educators who have an interest in improving the quality of public education and fostering the effective involvement of minority parents. Further, the achievement of these two goals are closely linked to parent and citizen participation in public education as a way of

contributing to a more democratic and equitable society, where each American citizen, regardless of his or her ethnic and cultural background has a chance for an education and a future which may respond to the demands of the changing times (Davies, 1989).

In summary, American education is failing to educate minority students, particularly those of Hispanic heritage. The need to recognize that minority students have low achievement scores and high dropout rates has been addressed by educators and social scientists in the last two decades, yet Black and Hispanic students are still falling behind their White counterparts. The cost of losing our minority students has begun to impact our welfare as a nation. Further, the economic future of this country will be in serious jeopardy if we continue to exclude our minority children and their families from the “American dream.” In our search for solutions to this challenge, minority parental involvement is seen as crucial to improving the education, learning, and academic achievement of minority children, and as an avenue to foster minority parents’ participation in our public education system.

The initial idea for this study emerged from the realization that there is a clear consensus about the need to incorporate Hispanic parents in the educational process of their children. The home-school relationship is now viewed with a real understanding that the school involvement of minority parents can have a positive impact on their children’s educational achievement. Multicultural school counselors and educators in particular are attempting to involve Hispanic parents as resources in their educational strategies.

This study intended to provide directions for a multicultural partnership with one of the many groups that makeup the the construct of Hispanic: The

Puerto Ricans. I explored, specifically, Puerto Rican parents' perceptions about their school involvement in the education of their children in elementary school.

Purpose of the Study

Social scientists, educators and multicultural school counselors have identified minority parental involvement as a vital factor in improving the education of minority students in the public schools (Atkinson & Juntunen, 1994; Carey et al., 1990; Casas & Furlong, 1994; Colbert, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994). This study explored Puerto Rican parents' perceptions regarding their school involvement and interactions with school personnel, and how those perceptions and interactions can be used to enhance the educational and learning process of their children attending first grade in a public elementary school.

The primary questions guiding this study were the following:

1. What are parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's learning and development?
2. What is the significance of parents' past and present school experiences and their perceptions of their relationship with the school?
3. What are parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's education?
4. How do parents view family involvement in educational activities, as they relate to their children's school and learning experiences?

The answers to these questions may shed light on Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their involvement in the education and learning of their children in a local public school. It may also provide information about the level of their

understanding of their parental involvement. Thus, the answers to these questions have practical implications for the field of multicultural counseling and education.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the growing body of knowledge on multicultural counseling interventions at the elementary-school level, and provided one of the very few studies at this level that focused on Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their involvement in the schooling of their first-grade children. It also built upon the existing literature on how minority parents participate in the schools.

School personnel, particularly multicultural school guidance counselors concerned with the involvement of Puerto Rican parents at the elementary-school level, will find practical multicultural ideas in this study. They will also find some of the culture-bound factors operating for these parents when interacting with the school. Puerto Rican parents' involvement in the school is a pivotal educational resource in the education of their elementary-school children. Hispanic students are the most affected by current problems in education such as underachievement and dropping out.

Proponents of multicultural counseling and education will also be interested in the findings of this study. The United States' public schools are experiencing a tremendous increase in the number of minority students; there is great pressure to deliver culturally-sound educational strategies that may respond to the students' well-being and the economic reality of the country. Educators may develop strategies to involve parents as resources. They will welcome the findings of this study, especially those regarding Puerto Rican

parents' perceptions of their involvement in public school. While the study may be of most interest to those concerned with multicultural counseling and education, it also provided many practical ideas and insights for elementary school principals concerned with either minority children's learning and development or minority parents' school involvement.

It is hoped that this study, exploratory and descriptive in nature, offered researchers, school counselors, principals and teachers involved in multicultural counseling and education research, methods for conducting qualitative elementary school studies, and hypotheses for further research on this topic.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. This research was primarily a study of one group of Puerto Rican parents with children in an urban elementary school. Although the twelve parents represent a fairly homogeneous sample, they cannot be said to be representative of minority parents in elementary public schools as a whole. The sample was gathered entirely from the same school, which is not fully representative of the elementary public schools in the area and the city itself. The sample was mainly Puerto Rican mothers and does not adequately reflect the perceptions of minority parents from other ethnic groups.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire Puerto Rican population in the continental United States, since the research was primarily a study of one group of Puerto Rican parents with children in a local, inner-city elementary public school. It is possible that the findings of this study will be most useful to school personnel, especially multicultural school

counselors and educators who work predominantly in minority environments. Detailed descriptions of parents' perceptions of their involvement with the elementary school will help the reader to decide if the findings are useful to other schools in the area, in their attempt to increase parental involvement, particularly that of Hispanic parents.

The research methodology for the study had several inherent limitations. I conducted phenomenological interviews with Puerto Rican parents, focusing on their school involvement and experiences. The data gathered from these interviews generated some variation in the depth and content of individual experiences. Consequently, while I have made every attempt to provide a broad perspective, I am not able to claim that I know the perceptions of every Puerto Rican parent with children in elementary school.

Another limitation of this study was related to its design. A qualitative case study approach was chosen for this study in an effort to understand the complex nature of Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's elementary school. Case study research is an "ideal design for understanding and interpreting observation of educational phenomena" (Merriam, 1988; p.2). Therefore, the predictive nature of the findings of an experimental design was exchanged for a detailed account of a complex educational phenomenon. The use of the case study was especially useful in presenting information about an area of education where little research has been conducted.

Researcher's Bias

The trustworthiness of any study depends on the researcher's awareness of his/her own biases. I have attempted to become aware of my beliefs and prior

experiences in the public schools which influence my perception of parents' involvement in the school, but the interpretive nature of qualitative research always leaves open the possibility of bias. The examination of one's biases and assumptions is an important aspect of the qualitative researcher's work. I agree with Peskin (1988) who indicated that "by monitoring myself, I can create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined. I do not thereby exorcise my subjectivity. I do, rather, enable myself to manage it -- to preclude it from being used unwittingly -- as I progress through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data" (p.20).

I have become familiar with the Puerto Rican community due to ten years of working with some of its members. For three years, I have worked as a part-time clinician in a local counseling agency doing community outreach and school counseling in a local middle-school. I have intervened at various stages, from helping some of the families and parents with school-related issues to developing and implementing a summer school program to helping their children with their academic and social skills.

My personal experiences as a member of the Hispanic community in this country and my working experiences with Puerto Rican parents and their children have, without a doubt, had an effect on my perceptions regarding this study. I needed to be careful about my tendency to criticize the way some public school personnel view minority parents' involvement in their schools. Because of my work experiences, I have certain ideas about what types of parental involvement are more effective. For this study, I needed to focus on the context of this elementary school and the way it engages and fosters parental involvement. I sought to reduce this limitation by both close examination of my

involvement. I sought to reduce this limitation by both close examination of my reactions to and interpretations of events throughout the study, as well as through the use of “triangulating strategies” (Patton, 1990) and checking my perceptions with the parents and school personnel.

Merriam (1988) has indicated that in a qualitative study, ethical and bias dilemmas are likely to emerge either during the collection of data or during the dissemination of the findings. It is important to note that I wrote from the position of the researcher and, despite my approach and subject participation, the ultimate decision about what was written was mine.

I was committed to conducting this study because of my understanding of the issues and the school’s present need for it. There are a number of studies and models, but they are closer to one of middle-class parental involvement. I am aware of the lack of studies specifically involving Puerto Ricans at the elementary-school level. This study was aimed at shedding light on the educational reality of Hispanic children and their parents’ school involvement.

Definition of Terms

The following section presents operational definitions of key concepts of this study to insure the readers understanding of the way in which these concepts were used throughout the study:

Parental Involvement: The definition of parental involvement used in this study is a descriptive one. It refers to any of a variety of activities that allow parents to participate in the educational process at home or in school, such as information exchange, decision sharing, volunteer services for school, home tutoring/teaching and child advocacy (Chavkin & Williams, 1985).

Hispanic: The term Hispanic is a generic term used to refer to persons of Spanish heritage living in the United States. Although they may share a common language and some cultural values, they are a heterogeneous group divided by geography, country of origin, race, socioeconomic status and education. In the national census of 1990 there were approximately 22.4 million Hispanics or nine percent of the nation's nearly 250 million people (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993), making them the second-largest minority group in the U.S.

Puerto Rican Parents: This is a generic term used in this study to refer to a biological relationship or any adult(s) who is the major presence responsible for the care and well-being of the child. Further, it refers to parents who were born in Puerto Rico, or whose parents were born in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are the second-largest minority group in the United States.

Multicultural: This is a descriptive term that refers to an approach to education, counseling and parental involvement which promotes cultural pluralism and social equality by reforming the school programs for students, school personnel, and parents to make them reflect the ethnic diversity of our nation (Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

Culture: A practical definition for this study is adapted from Nobles (1978) : "Culture is a montage of specific ways of thinking, feeling and acting which is peculiar to the members of a particular group. Specific to a peoples' cultural montage is a particular belief system. Conversely, it is the people's

cultural belief system which reveals their cultural montage, and in so doing, reflects their world view, normative assumption, and frame of reference” (p.682).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter One provided an overview of the research topic, as well as the purpose and significance of the study. Limitations of the study and researcher’s bias were also presented. Definition of key terms were provided.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature of the theoretical perspectives that framed the study. A review of the literature on parental involvement is presented as a beginning point for understanding the context of the study. Then the role that parent-teacher communication plays is explored, as it pertained to parent involvement in the public school. Finally, minority parental involvement is explored, as it related to their school participation and children’s education and academic achievement.

Chapter Three presents a detailed description of the overall approach of the inquiry, setting, data-collection method, participants, procedures, and data analysis. Chapter Four provides a cultural-demographic profile of participants, and the findings related to participants’ stories about their perceptions of their involvement in their children’s elementary school. Chapter Five presents a discussion of the findings and conclusions of the study. It also presents the implications of the study for research and practice.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter will address several sources which provided the theoretical perspectives that framed this study. In the first section of the literature review, I will discuss the construct of parental involvement and its context. Next, I will review and discuss the role that communication plays between teachers and parents and its effect on parental involvement. Finally, I will review the literature that addressed minority parents' school involvement, primarily in terms of its significance and impact on their child's academic achievement.

Parental Involvement

A Definition

In recent years, the education and counseling literature has made numerous references to the term "parental Involvement." It has been previously indicated that parental involvement includes a variety of activities that allow parents to participate in the educational process of their children at home or in school (Chavkin & Williams, 1985). This generic definition may not reflect the many things that parent involvement means to educators and parents. However, for some educators, it refers to parents' participation in home-school activities. Some may refer to special programs designed to encourage parents of young children to become more involved with their children's learning activities (Henderson et al., 1986). For some parents, it can involve many activities, ranging from parents simply walking their child to school, to a parent serving as

a member of the School Board. It can also range anywhere from helping children with their homework to gaining complete control of a school by the community (Nieto,1985; Rivera,1993).

Although the literature does not provide one clear-cut definition of the term parental involvement (Henderson et al.,1986), most researchers acknowledge that a definition of parental involvement should be a comprehensive one which would include types of activities, roles, and educational expectations that parents play/have in the education of their children at home and school. Furthermore, the fields of education and multicultural counseling are still seeking to provide a definition of parental involvement that may accommodate parents' socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds (Atkinson & Juntunen,1994; David,1993). It is the inclusion of these variables that may help us to accurately define the comprehensive and dynamic role of minority parents in the education of their children.

Parental Involvement in Context

In understanding current perceptions of parental involvement, it is necessary to indicate that, historically, American public education has been closely linked with the community and the family (Chavkin,1993). However, this relationship has changed over time and the situation today is vastly different than in the past. Social and education scientists have stated that since the 1930s, and especially after World War II, there has been a considerable consolidation of the public schools (Mole,1993). This consolidation of the schools has taken away its local "flavor," making it more difficult to maintain a home-school partnership. Gradually, education moved away from the home, and the job of teachers meant that teaching was a job for trained specialists.

School teachers began assuming many of the parental roles; for example, values education, sex education, safety education, and career development (Bank,1989).

Since the 1960s, our nation has gone through a new set of changes having to do with demographics, family life and economics. These changes have called public education into question, and public education has experienced criticism and controversy because of its inability to respond to societal expectations and minority groups' educational demands.

Parents' involvement in the education of their children has been part of public education strategies since the early 1960s; with the passage of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964, parental involvement in the schools reached a new dimension. It called for parents to begin "serving on policy and advisory committees, working alongside educators in making important decisions, and affecting program design and operation" (Morrow,1989, p.293). Currently, social scientists, educators and parents cite the dynamic history of families and schools working together and call for more parent involvement in education (Chavkin,1990; Mole,1993; Davis,1993). Parental involvement seems to be the key element in seeking new ways for home and school to get and work together.

Gordon (1970), in his review of the literature on parental involvement in compensatory education, suggested that a variety of places and programs, and certain types of involvement have been identified. He stated that parental roles can be viewed as spokes on a wheel which include: parents as audience; parents as teachers at home; parents as volunteers; parents as paid employees; and parents as decision makers. These roles not only influence

their own behavior, but also change the community agencies with which they interact.

Filipczak et al. (1979), in their review of the literature on parental involvement, wrote that educators fostering parental involvement point to a number of activities in which parents can engage. These activities can be categorized into four basic activity areas: 1) volunteerism; 2) parent-school communication; 3) parent education or training; and 4) policy-making.

The above reviewers illustrated the initial attempts made to bring home and school together. Gordon spoke of programs and types of involvement as a dynamic process which influences parents' behaviors in their interactions with schools. This type of parental involvement enhances parents cooperation with the institutions serving them and the community. The work of Filipczak and colleagues illustrated and documented the initial attempts of educators to reach out to parents. However, the activities in which parents can engage is a "one-way street," since the educators are the ones initiating the activities. But despite this one-way element, this is one of the very first attempts described in the literature about involving parents in school activities which are related to their children's learning.

A review of the effects of parental involvement on student achievement was conducted by Gordon (1978). He categorized parent participation according to several models: 1) the Parent Impact Model, which illustrates the educational partnership and the influence of parents at home on a child's learning patterns; 2) the School Impact Model, which speaks of the direct involvement of parents in the school, from volunteering to serving on governance councils; and 3) the Community Impact Model, where parent

involvement means playing numerous roles, from teacher at home to active member of the local community. Gordon found a lack of consistency in the research on some of the models and concluded that the more comprehensive and long-lasting the parent involvement, in all roles rather than concentrated on one or two, the more effective and powerful it is likely to be.

In the same vein, Henderson et al. (1986) presented a framework for parent roles in education and group activities in which parents take part, into five basic roles. These are: 1) Parents as Partners, where parents' basic obligations are for their children's education and social development; 2) Parents as Collaborators and Problem Solvers, where parents reinforce the school's efforts with their children and help to solve problems; 3) Parents as Audience, where parents attend and appreciate performances and productions of their children's and the school's; 4) Parents as Supporters, where parents provide volunteer assistance to teachers, the parent organization and to other parents; 5) Parents as Advisors and/or Co-decision makers, where parents provide input on school policies and programs through membership in ad hoc governance bodies.

It is clear that both researchers are speaking of the responsibility of parents to ensure the educational success of their children. In order to obtain the best education for their children, parents need to be active participants in their partnership with educators and school administrators. To achieve educational success for their children, parents need to work together effectively to promote, develop, and encourage positive and consistent parental involvement.

Based on her research and synthesis of the literature, Epstein (1988) concluded that there are five types of parental involvement. These are: 1) basic obligations of parents to children and school; 2) basic obligations of schools to children and family; 3) parent involvement at school; 4) parent involvement in learning activities at home; 5) parent involvement in governance and advocacy. Epstein wrote that the five types of parent involvement include “activities that most schools conduct with a few parents, or few parents conduct on their own. However, all schools can improve in all five areas” (p.59). Furthermore, Epstein’s five types of parental involvement involve a wide array of responsibilities, covering a number of relationships, including those formed in the home, school, and community. The family, school, and community play a significant role since they affect and are affected by the dynamics of their relationship.

Swap (1993) reported that the partnership between families and schools produce crucial benefits for children, despite the lack of support from school-community cultures and district, state and national policies. She described four models of home-school relationships: 1) The Protective Model, where schools enforce strict separation between parents and educators. It assumes that parents delegate to the school the responsibility for educating their children and hold staff accountable for the results, and collaboration and problem-solving are not encouraged; 2) The School-to-Home Transmission Model, where the goal is to enlist parents in supporting the objectives of the school; 3) The Curriculum Enrichment Model, which is designed to expand the school’s curriculum by incorporating contributions of families’ knowledge and skills to the school. Parents explain their cultural heritage as part of a multicultural program, for

example, or collaborate with teachers to reinforce at home what is being taught at school; and 4) The Partnership Model, where parents and educators work together to accomplish the common mission of helping all children in school to achieve success. This model emphasizes two-way communication, parents' strengths, and joint problem-solving. Swap reported the need to foster the development of partnership programs and indicated that "given the widespread recognition that parent involvement in schools is important, that it is unequivocally related to improvements in children's achievement, and that improvement in children is urgently needed, it is paradoxical that most schools do not have comprehensive parental involvement programs" (p.12).

In summary, parental involvement is one of the key educational strategies of public education in responding to societal expectations and minority groups' educational needs. Parent involvement is an important answer in closing the gap between families and schools and allowing them to work together towards our children's academic achievement and school success. In addition, the different models of parental involvement foster the dialogue between home and families from the perspective of a two-way communication. Based on the acknowledgements of the challenges to our public education system, parental involvement offers a way of bringing together all participants in the education of our children. Parental involvement models, particularly partnership programs, recognize the pluralistic nature of our society, as well as the importance of our children's cultural membership and background, and parents' strengths as solution givers and seekers.

How can we apply this knowledge about parent involvement in our multicultural society, with the understanding that the main component of the

relationship between school and family is the communication between parents and educators? What is the role of their understanding of parental involvement in their communication? In an attempt to address these questions, the role that communication plays between teachers and parents will be presented.

The Role of Parent-Teacher Communication

According to the social science literature, since the late 1970s there has been a trend towards improving communication between parents and teachers, as a way of seeking new and more effective ways of involving parents in the schools and building an educational relationship. Among educators, for instance, there is considerable interest in improving teacher-parent communication to enhance their educational tasks. In a NEA poll (1981), it was found that over 90 percent of educators nationwide and at all grade levels stated that more teacher-parent communication would be desirable.

A similar trend was previously reflected in the nationwide Gallup polls of public attitudes towards the public schools (1978). It presented guidelines for some specific forms of parent involvement in the educational partnership. For example, when asked what more the public schools in their community should be doing, a frequent suggestion was for closer parent-teacher relationships, including more conferences between parents and teachers. Further, parents stated that they “would like to know much more about what parents can do in the home to help their children in school” (p. 36).

It appears that parents and school staff agree on the need to coordinate efforts in dealing with problems of discipline, motivation, and good work habits. Parents have been asked about their conception of the “ideal school,” and they have listed qualified teachers, discipline, teaching of the basics, homework

assignments, better communication with the home, courses or seminars for parents and opportunities for parents to be involved in the school (Gallup, 1979).

Webb (1979) conducted a survey of the types of communication between home and school that parents felt they needed in order to achieve productive parental involvement. He found that most parents tend to seek out personal contact with school staff, with special focus on information about their children's learning and school educational strategies.

Cattermole and Robinson (1985) examined 400 parents' opinions about home-school communication. They found that children are the most frequent source of information about school, and that parents value gaining information about the school through face-to-face interactions: parents conferences, visits to the school, and school open houses. They pointed out that parents who participated in their survey were primarily middle-class and have high educational aspirations for their children.

Communication plays a significant role in fostering an effective relationship between parents and teachers. Parents and teachers have stated the need for parental involvement in the school as a way of enhancing their educational partnership. The quality of their communication and involvement are pivotal in the determination of public opinion towards our public schools and the implementation of educational strategies.

Currently, the role of communication between teachers and parents appears to be wider, since new elements have been incorporated. Issues related to our pluralistic society and the increasing number of families of different cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status seem to challenge the traditional patterns of communication. For instance, Bermudez (1993) indicated

that involving families in the school has become a major goal of teachers working with at-risk students. Further, she said that the need to establish a two way communication has become essential in the development of a parent-teacher educational partnership since a systematic collaboration between the home, the school and the community remains a distant reality. According to Bermudez, establishing a collaborative educational relationship with the families of these children is vital to any type of parental involvement. Teachers have realized that support from home, community, and school are necessary prerequisites for these children's academic success.

Dauber and Epstein (1993) examined 2,317 parents' reports of their attitudes about their children's school, their practices at home, their perceptions of how the school involves parents, and their preferences for actions and programs of the school. These authors found that most parents believe that their children attend a good school and that teachers care about their children. Parents reported little involvement at the school building and were emphatic about wanting the school and teachers to advise them on how to help their children at school. Parents who were guided by teachers on how to help at home spent more minutes helping with homework than other parents.

The significance of the role that communication plays between teachers and Hispanic parents was discussed by Carrasquillo (1991). She said that if Hispanic parents are provided with positive information about their children's learning and academic achievement, they are more likely to participate in school-related activities. Further, she acknowledged the difficulties in their communication because of the Hispanic parents' language diversity and English language limitations. For example, some parents are fully bilingual,

other are proficient in Spanish with a functional speaking knowledge of English. Some are English proficient with no knowledge of Spanish. A few are illiterate in both languages. Teachers and school personnel in general need to come up with strategies to communicate effectively with them.

Similarly, Yao (1993) in her article about strategies for working with Asian immigrant parents, pointed out that teachers need to be careful about the language they use when talking with Asian parents about their children and their involvement with the school. She also indicated that any communication with them needs to pay attention to the family's strengths and that teachers should provide clear examples to ensure that parents understand what educational goals their children are working towards.

David (1993) stated that there are benefits to teacher-parent communication and that parental involvement is related to their basic task of reducing the high rate of social and academic failure of low-income and minority children. A good relationship among school, parents and community can bring a number of benefits to teachers and school. For example, when parents are involved with the school in the education of their children, they have a more positive view of the teachers and the school. This positive view is closely related to increased access to school resources and facilities and to increased collaboration to solve community problems.

Carrasquillo and London (1993) indicated that a reasonable effort has been made by teachers to strengthen links between minority family, home and school, by fostering parental involvement and by reaching out to parents in a genuine and culturally-sensitive way. According to these authors, teachers' attempts to legitimize the valuable input of parents in the functions of the public

school has motivated parents' school involvement. The communication between teachers and parents has helped to support the existence and purpose of their educational relationship.

The new elements in the communication between teachers and parents are related to the involvement of families of various cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status in the school. Since parents of at risk-students believe that teachers care about their children's educational needs, there is a clear need to establish a pluralistic communication if teachers are to become competent in our multicultural society. Teachers' awareness of the language to be used when communicating with minority parents is a good first step towards the goal of an effective educational relationship. The validation of parents cultural communication patterns and input in the educational process of their children have increased the opportunities for their school involvement and collaboration with the school.

The literature also described a number of factors which have become barriers to effective parental involvement and the communication between teachers and parents. For example, Bermudez (1989) wrote that middle-class professionals have difficulties understanding minority families and their children. She explained that teachers have cited the following barriers to effective communication with parents: 1) the endorsement of negative stereotypes; 2) the fear and distrust of unfamiliar individuals and lifestyles; 3) the lack of an understanding of the home language; and 4) the lack of formal training in dealing with parents. Bermudez provided a clear illustration of what has traditionally happened to teachers working with parents of cultural backgrounds different than their own. These barriers also point to teachers'

need for multicultural training to improve their communication with minority parents. It is expected that the development of programs to foster knowledge about these families may eliminate unfounded beliefs.

Some researchers have indicated that the educational dialogue that has traditionally prevailed in public schools has assumed the support of middle-class parents, and middle-class parents have taken for granted that the school will act as an extension of their desires and values in educating their children (Asher, 1988; Todd, 1992). This way of communicating has not always been effective when it comes to establishing an educational relationship with minority parents. In one respect, the lack of sensitivity inherent in the educational system tends not to validate significant ethnic and cultural diversity in home and community life (Cole et al., 1988). In another respect, the communication between minority parents and teachers has been for the most part framed within this middle-class way of communicating. This communication mode has had a negative impact on parents' involvement in the schools (Todd, 1992).

This lack of cultural sensitivity and the tendency to foster middle-class values have led to an educational system based on the negative legacy originated in parent-teacher mutual distrust and negative stereotypes. Clearly, the communication frame that prevails in the schools has not allowed the creation of a climate for a pluralistic conversation. Henderson et al. (1986) have stated that:

"The turf between parents and teachers is often exacerbated by negative, inaccurate stereotypes of one another. Parents complain that teachers don't make enough effort to understand their children, that they keep parents at bay with educational jargon, and that they are more concerned with preserving their professional prerogatives than with helping kids. Teachers complain that parents don't discipline their children properly, that they make inappropriate demands of children

and teachers, and that they seem unwilling to continue at home what the teacher is doing in the classroom.” (p.51)

In the same vein, Moles (1993) spoke of psychological and cultural barriers in explaining the obstacles to minority parental involvement and to the communication between minority parents and teachers. He indicated that disadvantaged parents and teachers may be “entangled by various psychological obstacles to mutual involvement such as misperceptions and misunderstandings, negative expectations, stereotypes, intimidation and distrust” (p. 33). He stated that they may also be victims of cultural barriers reflecting differences in language, values, goals, methods of education, and definitions of appropriate roles.

Both Henderson et al., and Moles have indicated that obstacles and barriers in the communication between parents and teachers have affected minority parental involvement. The predominant style of communication prevailing in the public schools has been developed within the middle-class educational dialogue frame. Consequently, this style of communication has not fostered any type of mutual understanding between teachers and parents and has become an obstacle to developing an educational partnership. There are various psychological and cultural barriers to minority involvement in the schools and to minority parent-and-teacher communication. This climate of mutual mistrust and misunderstanding has had a negative effect on minority students and their families, and points to the need to create a pluralistic dialogue in order to foster minority parental involvement in the schools and improve communication between teachers and parents.

The lack of culturally-sound communication in our pluralistic society is a real obstacle to any educational partnership that may enhance student learning and academic achievement. The field of education is still seeking to provide ways in which both families and school staff may agree on changing their perceptions about each other. Both sides are working to create a climate of mutual cooperation where open, friendly and pluralistic communication may be seen as a step in re-directing their educational partnership.

Researchers are trying to respond to the challenge and to provide ways to change teachers and parents perceptions about each other. For instance, Becker and Epstein (1982) studied how elementary school teachers felt about parental involvement in home learning as a teaching strategy, and to see how widespread this teaching strategy was. Participants were 3,700 public elementary school teachers (20 percent of the sample was African-American). The results of their study indicated that teachers have a very positive view of parent-oriented teaching strategies and there is widespread use of home learning teaching techniques.

Epstein (1986) examined parents' attitudes towards the school and teachers, their experience with different kinds of involvement and communication with the school, and their reactions to teachers programs and practices of parental involvement. Parents (62 percent White and 36 percent Black) of 1,269 students in 82 first-, third- and fifth-grade classrooms in Maryland participated in the study. It was found that parents in general had positive attitudes about their public elementary school and teachers. Parents believed that the goals of teachers were similar to their own goals, and believed the school could do more to involve them in learning activities to help their

children at home. A large number of parents were excluded from some of the most basic, traditional communications from the school.

In a more recent study focusing on teachers, Epstein and Dauber (1991) investigated the connections between school programs of parent involvement, teachers' attitudes, and practices that teachers use to involve parents of their own students. Participants were 171 teachers from eight inner-city elementary and middle schools in Baltimore. They found that teachers have strong, positive attitudes about parent involvement, and that attitudes are more positive for teachers who teach in self-contained classrooms. Teachers who perceived high support for parental involvement from their colleagues and parents are seen as leaders. Teachers with positive attitudes support practices such as holding conferences, communicating with parents about school programs, and providing both good and bad reports about students' progress.

According to the findings of these studies, the perceptions of teachers and parents does not seem to be an obstacle when it comes to a communication that enhances specific instructional practices. Teachers have found it useful to implement their parent-oriented instructional strategies and parents' involvement in learning activities with their children at home. Parents welcomed their involvement in learning activities with their children at home and believed that teachers educational goals are similar to their goals.

Minority Parental Involvement

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (1987) reported that by the year 2000, minority children will become the majority adult population in at least five of our nation's states: Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Further, the U.S. Census Bureau (1990) reported that

by the end of the 1990s, children from racial and ethnic minorities will constitute one-third of the school-age population. In several major U.S. cities, such children are already the majority.

Demographic studies reinforce these trends and indicate that the “traditional” American family exists in a very small minority of households and, because of the dynamic changes in our nation, new types of families are emerging at a very rapid pace (Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Rivera-Batiz & Santiago, 1994; Montgomery, 1994; Sue, 1990; Swap, 1993). There are indications that these changes and challenges will continue and that more urban families will be minority, poor, headed by women and with a lower standard of living (Bauch, 1993; Colbert, 1991). However, knowledge of the changing conditions of family life for poor and minority families can also explain the difficulty of generating active minority parent involvement (Ascher, 1988; Chavkin & Williams, 1993).

It is expected that this knowledge may enable educators and administrators to plan and develop more effective ways of increasing the level of parental involvement in their school. The urban school must join with minority and poor parents in order to make any educational project with their children as effective as possible.

Ascher (1988) acknowledged these changes and challenges and wrote of the many problems that urban minority parents face, as well as the increasing pressure on teachers and administrators. She stated that in studying the issues concerning school expectations for minority-parent involvement, the following questions should be considered: “In what ways can single or working parents be expected to participate? What responsibility do schools have to engage

parents who may be particularly busy, whose household may be chaotic, or who, for other reasons, are more difficult to reach? What should be done for the increasing number of parents whose native language is not English, and whose cultural background may remove them from the goals and workings of the school?" (p.115).

Pedersen and Carey (1994) suggested that our public schools must renew their commitment to the advancement of minority groups or the economic future of the nation will be jeopardized. They pointed out the need to achieve full minority participation in the life and prosperity of the country, as a way of preventing the widening of the gap between minority and majority groups. Maintaining a lower standard of living for minorities is certain to continue if the disparities are not changed. One way to start challenging the standards is through multicultural approaches to parent involvement in public education.

Chavkin (1993) pointed out that both multicultural research and practice coincide on the importance of parental involvement. However, this is not always the case when it comes to minority students and their families. She argued that a multicultural perspective is needed since the multicultural perspective is the critical issue that has been ignored.

There are barriers and obstacles to an effective role for minority parents in the schools. In a survey conducted by Harris and associates (1987), it was found that parents in the inner-city district were less satisfied than suburban parents with the frequency and quality of their contact with teachers and administrators. In addition, minority parents with less than a high school education felt awkward about contacting school staff. Minority parents in general were intimidated by the staff and the institutional structure of the school,

especially if they had had negative experiences with the school in the past (Wells, 1988).

Comer (1986) stated that the lack of well-designed and culturally-sensitive programs for minority parents is the reason many traditional parent-teacher organizations do not do much to improve their participation in the school. He believes that minority parents need clear mechanisms for their involvement and that their participation should be structured to overcome the typical problems that take place because of their socioeconomic, educational and cultural status.

Chavkin (1990) suggested that among the reasons for the lack of minority parental involvement is the stereotypical view of them, and the erroneous assumption that they don't care about their children's learning and education. Furthermore, Chavkin and Williams (1993), in their study about minority parents and the elementary school, found that minority parents are concerned about their children's education and that they want to take an active role in their children's education. They stated that educators should not assume that parents do not care about their children's education.

In the same vein, Ritter et al. (1993), in their study about minority parents' attitudes and behaviors towards teachers and schools, found that minority parents generally agree that it is appropriate for them be involved in their children's education. Hispanic and Asian parents tend to trust the school more than African-American parents and are less likely to contact the school if they have a problem. The researchers concluded that "these data certainly refute the stereotype that minority parents are not concerned with their children working hard in school. Among low-education Hispanics, the group with the lowest total

academic-importance score, the mean response approaches “very important” (p.112).

In summary, a multicultural perspective on minority parental involvement may be the answer to the implications of changing demographics and the “new” poor urban families, and to our country’s economic strength and well-being. A multicultural perspective in the public schools is needed, since the multicultural perspective is the critical issue that has been ignored and the need to respond to our societal expectations and minority educational needs is more pressing than ever. A multicultural perspective is the frame needed to challenge the mythical and stereotypical view that minority parents don’t care about their children’s learning and educational achievements. This view has been empirically refuted and challenged due to its lack of foundation.

A multicultural practice or view of minority parental involvement is closely related to some culture-specific dynamics. For example, Montalvo (1984) stated that when working with Hispanic families and their children, the school should build a bridge to the home and community. He wrote that education is a key cultural value for the Hispanics and that the school needs to help Hispanic families in validating their educational beliefs. In other words, any relationship between home, community and school needs to respond to educational beliefs, since it can provide a frame for a mutual understanding on the issue of educational needs and expectations of the minority child. An awareness and validation from school staff and teachers of the value of education for Hispanics is a culturally-sound step towards a productive educational relationship.

Similarly, there is a need for culture-specific considerations in conferring with Hispanic parents. Plata (1989) discussed teacher-reported problems in communicating with Hispanic parents and suggested that teachers need to develop a trusting relationship with Hispanic parents. Understanding that apparent ambivalence during parent-teacher conferences may be culturally-bound behavior is vital to the development of the relationship. Cultural traditions, beliefs and values are important to recognize in order to initiate an effective relationship.

The multicultural view of creating effective Hispanic parental involvement in the school was discussed by Casas and Furlong (1994). They stated that multicultural school counselors can position themselves as advocates, by taking steps to insure that the school engages in culturally-sensitive ways of planning and implementing Hispanic parents' school involvement.

Presently there is very little room to argue that there are not culture-specific ways to engage Hispanic parents with the school. The need to bridge the school with the family and community is not new in the field of multicultural counseling and education. Further, in communicating with Hispanic parents, teachers need to create a trusting relationship where the role of cultural traditions will be recognized and validated. The role that a multicultural counselor may play as an advocate for effective Hispanic parental involvement will help to insure that the public school participates in the creation of a sensitive, comprehensive, and culturally-sound partnership.

The literature on minority parental involvement and children's academic achievement shows the significance and positive results of this relationship. For example, the role Hispanic parents played in nine first-grade children's

acquisition of word-recognition skills was investigated by Goldenberg (1987). This was part of a year-long ethnographic study of home and school influences on the Spanish reading achievement of at-risk, low-income first graders. Information was collected from direct observations at home and school, interviews with parents and teachers, teacher rating scales, student testing and conversations with children. The author found that all parents, despite their low socioeconomic status, were capable of helping their children and expressed a willingness to do so. Further, two parents, by directly helping their children to learn the school's reading curriculum, made the greatest contribution to their children's achievement.

Soto et al. (1988) examined the correlations between school-related perceptions of 57 Puerto-Rican mothers residing in Pennsylvania and achievement of their fifth- and sixth-grade children. Data came from a family enrollment schedule that yielded scores for satisfaction with school, teachers, and subject areas and a measure of the mother's language of preference for instruction. The children's achievement was measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. They found that maternal satisfaction was high and that 86 percent of the mothers expressed a preference for English as the language of instruction for their children. Maternal satisfaction with teachers and school activities correlated significantly with children's achievement in mathematics, but not with reading. The authors concluded that educators need to become sensitive to the family's perception of satisfaction with the school as a way fostering their active involvement with the school and education of their fifth- and sixth- grade children.

A study examining the effects of teacher-parent contact on the reading achievement of 398 underachieving students in a desegregated school was conducted by Iverson et al. (1981). Most of the students were Black and primarily from economically-disadvantaged homes who were reading one to two years below their grade level. The results, as measured by the California Achievement Test, indicated that the number of contacts was found to have a differential effect on achievement gains. With increasing numbers of contacts, younger students made significant gains in reading; however, increasing numbers of contacts were associated with decreased achievement in older students. They concluded that the results are a reminder of the importance of considering the special characteristics and needs of different learners, and implementing educational programs which involve parental participation and involvement .

Melnick and Richard (1990) examined the relationship among parents' attitudes about school effectiveness, parent involvement, and student achievement. They found that involving parents in substantive ways in their children's schooling had a significant impact on parents' attitudes towards the school and that their attitude can be a crucial factor in their children's success in education. A second finding demonstrated a direct relationship between parents' attitudes toward the school and student achievement.

In their longitudinal study of children at-risk, Reynolds et al. (1993) explored their educational experiences to discover the factors that contributed to their children's academic achievement and social adjustment. They found that despite their financial hardship, families in the study had positive attitudes towards their children's school and the importance of education. Further, the

most consistent predictor of children's academic achievement and social adjustment were parents' expectations of their child's educational attainment and satisfaction with their child's education at school. This study addressed the issue of parental involvement from the view that both family and school contribute to children's academic and social adjustment. The authors suggested that "these findings emphasize the importance of aligning the interest of families and schools in educational improvement efforts and reinforces this priority to school reform efforts" (p.78).

Snow et al. (1991) examined home and school influences on literacy achievement among children from low-income families. They studied 32 low-income children in grades two, four and six, attending five elementary schools in a small industrial city in the Northeast. It was found that the single variable most positively connected to all literacy skills was formal parent-school involvement. Furthermore, contacts between teachers and parents brought positive results, such as more positive teacher assessment of the family, parent communication with the school, improved school work, and gains on reading achievement tests.

Stevenson and Baker (1987) examined the relationship between parent involvement in activities at school and children's academic performance, regardless of the family's social and educational background. They found that children's school performance was positively related to parent involvement in school activities. Parents of girls tended to stay more involved and have more influence on achievement than parents of boys. Parent involvement mediated almost all the influence of a mother's education on the child's school performance. By itself, the mother's educational level had little effect on her

children's success. Mothers with less formal education had as much positive impact as did highly educated mothers.

The findings of the studies cited in this section indicated that teachers, counselors, school personnel and administrators need to foster and enlarge the conditions that allow positive minority-parent involvement. In their search for educational partners, teachers and counselors have focused on the positive effects that minority parental involvement has on the education of the minority child and at-risk student. The evidence clearly indicated there is a positive connection between minority parents involvement and their children's academic achievement. Minority parental involvement is a comprehensive dynamic which involves the roles, perceptions and attitudes of parents towards their children's teachers, schools and educational goals.

Summary

Overall, the literature has indicated that parental involvement is one of the key educational strategies of public education in responding to the current pressures and challenges from our society and minority children's educational needs. It has been documented that communication plays a main role between parents and teachers, and that there are traditional as well as new elements in their current communication. Families of different cultural backgrounds present themselves with specific communication styles that should be valued in order to have an effective and culturally-sensitive interaction. Teachers are aware of the barriers and obstacles to effective communication with parents and have tried instructional strategies which foster better educational communication; this new dialogue appears to have had a powerful impact on children's academic achievement and learning.

American society is experiencing a demographic dynamic that has begun to influence the ethnic make-up of the nation. There is evidence that in some parts of the country our minority population has become the majority. These changes have put pressure on our educational system with new challenges and demands. There is a new prototype of family in our cities which is poor, urban and mainly Hispanic and African-American. Educators and administrators are developing new ways of involving these families in the public schools, as a way of creating a culturally-sensitive response to their children's educational needs. There is a clear indication that the best modality in involving these parents in an effective fashion comes from a multicultural framework which, by definition, reflects the pluralistic nature of our nation.

Results from empirical studies strongly supported the evidence of the positive results of the roles and attitudes of minority parents towards their children's teacher and school. Further, the empirical evidence demonstrated the significant relationship between minority parents' involvement and their children's academic achievement. (See Table 2.1). What needs to be explored is minority parents' perceptions of their involvement in the public schools and their children's education. Both the theoretical and empirical literature reported the need to involve minority parents in the school, as well as citing the positive effects of their involvement. Unfortunately, none of the work in this area presented a first-hand account of minority parents' perceptions of their school involvement, based on in-depth phenomenological interviewing. It is imperative to explore parents' perceptions regarding their school involvement and interactions with school personnel from their own perspectives. This study focused on Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their involvement in the

schooling of their first-grade children, and was an attempt to provide directions for a multicultural educational partnership with Puerto Rican parents from an urban elementary school.

Table 2.1 Parent Involvement and Student Achievement:
Summary of Findings

Study	Purpose	Sample	Instrument	Findings
Chavkin, N.F. & Williams, D.L. (1993)	Examined the current attitudes and practices of minority parents regarding their involvement in their children's education	1,188 African-American and Hispanic parents	Parent Involvement Questionnaire	Minority parents are concerned about their children's education and they want to take an active role in their children's education
Iverson, B.K., Brownlee, G.D. & Walberg, H.J. (1981)	Investigated the effects of teacher-parent contacts on the reading achievement of students	398 primarily Black students in grades 1-8 who were reading one to two years below grade level	California Achievement Test	Increased parental contacts with the schools had different effects for children of different ages. Young students made significant gains in reading, while increased number of contacts in older students was associated with decreased achievement
Melnick, S.A. & Feine, R. (1990)	Studied the relationships among parents' attitudes about school effectiveness, parent involvement and student achievement	4,979 parents of children in grades K-5	Parent Attitudes Toward School Effectiveness Scale, Iowa Achievement Test	Involving parents in their children's schooling had a significant impact on parents' attitudes towards the school. There was a direct relationship between parents' attitudes toward the school and student achievement. Increased parental involvement related to improved academic performance and positive school perceptions.
Reynolds, A., Mavrogenes, N., Hagemann, M. & Bezruczko, N. (1993)	Examined the relationship between parents' expectations and their children's academic and social adjustment	1,235 children, 95 percent African-Amer., five percent Hispanic	Surveys and interviews, standardized test, school records	Families have positive attitudes toward their children's school. Children have positive attitudes about themselves. Parent involvement with the school is the major contributor to their children's academic and social adjustment.

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Table 2.1 (continued)

Study	Purpose	Population	Instrument	Findings
Ritter, P.L. Mont-Reynaud, R. & Dornsbusch, S.M. (1993)	Examined family attitudes and behaviors that affect educational performance in school	2,955 minority parents (Asian, African-American, Hispanic and non-Hispanic White)	Questionnaires	Parents in all groups generally agree that it is appropriate for them to be involved in their children's high school education. Hispanics and Asians tend to trust the school more than non-Hispanics and African-Americans; they are less comfortable with teachers, less likely to criticize teachers and more likely to defer to the school. Hispanic and Asian parents are also less likely to contact the school if they have a problem
Snow, C., Barnes, W., Chandler, J., Goodman, I.F. & Hemphill, L. (1991)	Examined the home and school influence on literary achievement among children from low-income	32 low-income children in grades two, four and six	Interview, school records, tests of literacy skills	The single variable most positively connected to all literacy skills is formal parent-school involvement.
Soto, L.D., Gellen, M.I. & Morris, J.D. (1988)	To examine the correlations between school-related perceptions of mothers and achievement of their children	57 Puerto Rican mothers of fifth and sixth graders	Marjoribanks family enviro. schedule, Iowa test of Basic Skills	86 percent of parents were very satisfied with the school. They also preferred English as the language for instruction.
Stevenson, D. & Baker, D. (1987)	Studied the relationship between children's school performance and parent involvement in school activities	179 children	Teacher rating	Parents with more education are more involved in school activities and parents of younger children are more likely to be involved in school activities than parents of older children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overall Approach of the Inquiry

I chose to conduct this research as a case study using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviewing. According to Patton (1990), case studies become “particularly useful where one needs to understand some special people, particular problem, or unique situation in great depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information” (p.54). The public school where the study took place offered the possibility to contact Puerto Rican parents who were considered potential research participants. This particular setting was considered the appropriate choice because of the nature of the study. I concur with Patton (1990), who stated that qualitative insights “add depth, detail, and meaning at a very personal level” (p.18).

The focus on Puerto Rican parents’ perceptions responded to my interest in how they make meaning of their involvement with their children’s elementary school. The assumption was that parents’ perceptions, understanding and descriptions are powerful elements in their school involvement. I focused on parents’ perceptions of their involvement in their children’s learning and development, the significance of past and present school experiences, and their perceptions of their relationship with the school. I also focused on parents’ aspirations and expectations of their children’s education, and their views of family involvement in educational activities, as they relate to their children’s school learning experiences. The case study approach helped me to see what Cronbach (1975) called “interpretation in

context.” I concentrated on a single phenomenon as part of my explanation of the significant factors characteristic of my case study. Therefore, the case study allowed me to seek holistic description as a way of offering insights into the phenomenon under study.

Most methodologies employed in social sciences research explain the construct of reality as being only external to the individual; therefore, reality is described as an “objective” one. On the other hand, qualitative research treats reality as having a subjective quality as well. Burrell and Morgan (1979) stated that epistemologies and methodologies which seek to explain reality and predict what happens in the social world, do so by “searching for regularities and casual relationship between its constituent elements” (p.6). They traditionally take the position that the standpoint of the “observer” is a valid vantage point for understanding human activities, but they also indicate that there are also epistemologies and methodologies that maintain that one can only “understand” reality and the social world by occupying the frame of reference of the participant in action. “One has to understand from the inside rather than outside. From this point of view, social science is seen as being essentially a subjective rather than an objective enterprise” (p.6).

I am not suggesting that reality is only subjective, nor do I deny that we are all involved in dialectical relationship with systems and institutions placed in the external world. In order to understand the effects of perceptions, participation, or change in people, then it is best to understand them from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved and affected by them. This made the case study the appropriate qualitative method for a research

topic investigating parents' perceptions of their involvement in the education and development of their children in an elementary public school.

Setting

The setting for this study was a public school serving grades kindergarten through eight. The school supports the values of a democratic, multicultural society. In the school's mission statement, it is indicated that the school will make an effort to produce citizens who are well-educated, sensitive to their fellow human beings, and respectful and appreciative of all races and cultures.

The school also represents the combined efforts of hundreds of people who had a vision of a new type of school which would offer an outstanding educational program for children and serve as a center for community agencies rendering assistance to the entire family (Springfield, Public School, 1992). The Hispanic community took an active role in this process through local community agencies such as New North Community Council and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. These community-based organizations brought the community's voices to the vision since they were able to organize the local community. Further, local residents of the area, those with and without children in the school, participated actively as community members. This was a clear reflection of the community spirit and parent involvement that existed in the 1970s in this Hispanic, "working-poor" community.

The school has a total of 1,200 students (30 percent White, 23 percent Non-White and 47 percent Hispanic), 111 teachers, five school counselors, four outreach workers, two assistant principals and a principal. Among the school's

special programs are: special education, transitional bilingual education, two-way bilingual Spanish program, and full-day kindergarten.

The physical plant is a three-story building located in an area of the city which is a predominantly low-income Hispanic neighborhood, with 55.8 percent of the school's students falling into the low-income category. The school's location in such an area was the city's response to the educational needs of the local Hispanic community.

This research setting was chosen for two primary reasons. To my knowledge, this is one of the very few schools in the area that is actively attempting to commit itself to multicultural education and greater minority-parent involvement. It offered me an opportunity to be part of this commitment and process, and the school administration has expressed much enthusiasm for this project. I have known the school principal for a number of years and we have worked together with the same community and student population in the past, in a different school and city.

The principal informed me that Hispanic parental involvement in the school was active during the 1970s, and that during the 1980s and 1990s it almost reached a level of non-existence. According to him, the local community has been affected by the economic conditions of the state and the nation. It went from a working poor to a low income inner-city type of community. Currently, Hispanic parental involvement at the school is minimal and parents only participate in activities that are cultural in nature.

Negotiating access to his school and the parents was done in a formal manner, when I shared my idea for the study with the school principal; he was enthusiastic about it and gave the immediate "go-ahead." There was no special

request on his part, in terms of getting a final report, but he clearly indicated that he would like to increase parental participation in the school, based on my findings. He also informed me about writing to administrative personnel in the local public school system in order to obtain official permission to conduct the study (See Appendix A, Permission Request Letter), and he called the research office to make sure that I got the “okay,” since he did not want any delay with this research project.

Data Collection Method

Interviews were used as the primary data collection method. (See Appendix B for the format that was used.) The interview guide was designed by first identifying the purpose of the study (e.g., explore Puerto Rican parents’ perceptions regarding their school involvement in their children’s elementary school), developing categories of interest within the research questions (e.g., investigate parents’ aspirations and expectations of their children’s education) and then writing open-ended questions corresponding to each category (e.g. What type of advice or activities would you give/suggest to the school principal in order to increase Puerto Rican parents’ school participation?).

In the process of designing this instrument, I held several meetings with my advisor, which generated a conversation where the interview guide evolved in a systemic way. The interview guide is closely related to the theoretical and empirical literature on parental involvement. Further, using open-ended questions, the guide was structured to find themes that were not in the literature. This process allowed me to consult and check with my advisor as needed. I also contacted another member of my dissertation committee who is an expert on

Puerto Rican issues, especially those related to family-school relationships. Her input and feedback were pivotal to the final draft of the interview guide.

Additionally, I used a “triangulation strategy” (Mathison, 1988) which ensured a higher degree of reliability and validity of the data obtained. After the interview guide was designed and approved, it was distributed to three doctoral students who had taken two qualitative research courses and are also knowledgeable in issues related to school, minority families and parental involvement. Biases were identified and, with the help of the members of my dissertation committee and the doctoral students, I revised the interview guide according to their constructive feedback.

I interviewed twelve Puerto Rican parents whose first-grade children attended elementary school. In-depth phenomenological interviewing was used to illustrate how parents make sense of their perception of school involvement and how parents’ experiences are viewed and understood by themselves. This phenomenological frame helped me to understand parents’ perceptions from their own point of view. This enhanced understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon for the participants was ultimately interpreted by me. I encouraged participants to speak about their experiences and expectations in a free and open-ended fashion. I used direct quotes from their answers, “revealing respondents’ depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences and their basic perceptions” (Patton, 1990, p.24). This process facilitated data analysis by making it possible to create categories based on participants’ answers within their similar and different themes.

Participants

Twelve Puerto Rican parents were interviewed for this study. All of them met the criteria for the study, as they all had a child attending a first-grade class in an inner-city, public elementary school. The twelve parents who participated in the study were mothers.

Eight of the participants were born in Puerto Rico and came to the United States when they were young or adults. Four were born and grew up in the United States. In addition, some of them were locally educated and attended the same elementary school as their children. A more complete and detailed cultural-demographic information profile of the twelve Puerto Rican parents is included in Chapter Four.

Procedures

Participants were identified through contact with the school's principal and the first-grade faculty. The principal provided me with a list of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the Hispanic-surnamed children in the first grade. Of the forty-three Hispanic children listed, six of them had no telephone number listed and five of them had their telephones disconnected. Next, the teachers gave me the names of some parents who were known to be interested in this type of research and who were also willing to participate in projects related to the education of their children and the school. I asked the faculty for the names of those parents who were also known to have little or no participation in the school. They provided me with a list of eight names for both categories. After that, I sent a note to the forty-three parents, inviting them to participate in the study. The letter was followed by a telephone call. When I learned that some families had moved, their telephone number was wrong or

the telephone had been disconnected, I spoke to the first-grade teachers and they suggested that I send a note home with the children. This is a standard procedure, commonly used by teachers in the school. After that, and based on the number of responses, I was able to make contact with potential participants. When contact (personal/telephone) was made, I explained to them the purpose of the study and requested again their participation in the study. Out of the forty-three potential subjects, ten indicated that lack of transportation and time were real obstacles to their participation in the study. Eight parents changed their mind after agreeing to participate. Twenty-five made the final commitment to participate in the study. From this pool, twelve of them were interviewed.

The interviews, which lasted one to two hours, were scheduled at participants' convenience. Some of the interviews took place at the school, others at participants' places of residence. Eight of the participants agreed to come to the school, and four of the participants, because of their family size, personal obligations and transportation problems, chose to be interviewed at their apartments. All of the interviews were conducted in a single session.

Upon introduction and presentation of the study, the researcher encouraged questions about the study. I indicated to all parents that my working experience and professional interest in the study originated from my relationship with the Puerto Rican community, especially with families and their school-age children. I also made reference to my professional relationship with the school principal and our work in the past. This short introduction had a powerful effect in establishing rapport and trust. All of them openly appreciated my honesty and welcomed me into their homes.

After the formal introduction, participants signed the consent to participate in the study. The interviews lasted from one to two hours and were conducted in Spanish and/or English, with the usual bilingual switching which is typical within the Puerto Rican community. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by me. After each interview I wrote my observations, comments, interpretations and reflections on the process and information generated in the interview.

Code numbers were used to protect participants' confidentiality. Their identity and all identifying references were disguised to ensure it. I reassured participants both verbally and in writing through the Parental Information and the Permission/Consent form they all signed. (See Appendix C for a copy of Parental Information and Permission/Consent.)

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data is a creative process. There is no single way of organizing, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. Patton (1990) suggested that each qualitative analyst must find his or her own process.

In the initial stage of my data analysis, I made three copies of all data; one copy was to write on and the other two were for cutting and pasting. I saved a master copy as the key resource for locating materials and maintaining the context for the raw data. Patton (1990) offered a method for getting started on the content analysis: after all interviews are transcribed and copied, the researcher begins by reading through and making comments in the margins, organizing the data into topics and files. A classification system is critical; without a classification system there is chaos.

In the process of analyzing the interviews, I used both case analysis and cross-case analysis. The case analysis was used specifically for the participant's profile or demographic information, since each participant interviewed was seen as a single unit for their straightforward answers having to do with age, educational level, income, occupation, language preference, etc. Participants were numbered from P1 (parent 1) to P12 (parent 12). Responses to each of the questions for this analysis were also numbered from 01 to 21. The cross-case analysis allowed me to group together answers from the participants to common questions or to analyze different perspectives on central categories or issues.

At this point in my data analysis, I read again the interviews several times, immersing myself in the data. After this process, I identified sixteen areas of content analysis which facilitated my search for patterns and themes. Themes were identified in broad categories of information. The categorization of the themes were to be based on the number of times that each category appeared in the raw data, the frequency with which the event was reported, and the explanation of the event by participants. The categories provided me with better evidence of my data, from which I inferred and constructed meaningful propositions about the convergence, inconsistencies and contradictions of the data about parents' perceptions of their school involvement.

After completion of the above process, I found four themes which were consistent throughout participants' narratives about their perceptions of their school involvement. In addition, these four themes enabled me to organize and present the most salient findings which were directly related to the stated purpose of the study and to the initial research questions. The four themes

were: 1) Parents want to be involved in their children's school; 2) Parents have positive attitudes towards their children's school, teachers and their communication with teachers; 3) Parents want to know about their rights in their children's school; 4) Parents are proud of their cultural background. The next chapter will present their stories, and the meaning made of their narratives.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings of this study are presented in narrative form, which will allow the reader to hear participants' voices. The primary questions guiding this study addressed parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's learning and development, the significance of their overall experience with the school, their expectations about their children's education, and how they view their involvement in educational activities. This chapter begins with a presentation of a demographic profile of participants. Excerpts of participants' responses are provided. The remainder of the chapter presents the four major themes generated in my data analysis.

I will begin with parents' desire to be involved in their children's school, and how they see and explain the many barriers impinging upon their involvement. I will present parents' positive attitudes about their children's school, teachers and communication, how they describe the positive features of the school, how they view their children's teachers, and their view of the role of communication in their relationship with teachers. Next, I will present parents' desire to know about their rights in their children's school, how they see themselves participating in the school's functioning, and their understanding of their role in the school's decision-making process. Finally, I will present parents' positive descriptions of the role of culture in their school involvement, how they view their cultural membership and the central values of their culture, the role of education in the family's messages and expectations, and the community's role

in their children's education. The findings of the study are summarized at the conclusion of this chapter.

Demographic Profile of Participants

Parents who participated in this study were twelve Puerto Rican women whose children were attending a first-grade class in a middle-size city in Western Massachusetts. Participants' ages ranged from early 20s to middle 30s. Five of the twelve participants were in their 30s and the rest were in their 20s. Eight of the participants were born and went to school in Puerto Rico. Four of the mothers were born in the Continental U.S. and attended school in New York and Springfield.

In terms of participants' formal level of education, there was only one with two years of college. Five of them had completed their high school education and hold a high school diploma. Five of the mothers dropped out of school at different grades (7, 9, 10) and one of the mothers who dropped out managed years later to get a G.E.D. One of the drop-out mothers stated: "Well, I did not finish school and, as a matter of fact, I almost forgot the little that I learned. I can't say that my school experience has helped me, but I still hope and pray that my daughter will have a better chance, that she can be somebody, a professional. I am trying so hard to help her."

Regarding participants' employment and occupational background, eleven of them are currently receiving public assistance. The only participant who is working has a job as a waitress in a local restaurant. One participant stated: "People think that we like to be on welfare. I wish I could get some help,

get more education. I need to show my kids that we can change, that they will have a future."

In terms of participants' parents occupation, it was indicated that parents' jobs were/are in farming, factories and maintenance. Participants' mothers were described as housewives and eleven of the participants stated that their occupation was also housewife.

Eight of the participants moved to the U.S. at different points in their lives. Some of them have been in the area for a number of years (12,14,15) and others have been in the area for only two years. With regard to their reasons for moving specifically to this area, six of the participants reported "personal issues," indicating problems with their husbands, as well as having family in the area and wanting a life change and better opportunities for them and their family. However, one of the participants stated: "My oldest son is handicapped and we came here searching for better medical services."

Right after moving to the Continental U.S. , eight of the participants became inner-city dwellers and some of them and their families had trouble adjusting to their new urban cultural environment. One of them indicated: "The biggest problem now is safety. I'm so afraid with the security and drugs in this neighborhood that at times I don't even want to send my children to school."

Six of the participants stated that they were separated from their husbands, four reported that they were married, and two refused to comment on it because of past negative experiences with social service workers. It appears that their refusal is related to some welfare regulations. For example, a mother who is receiving benefits from welfare is not allowed to have her male partner or companion on the premises. If it is found that she does, it may jeopardize her

family's well-being as she can lose her welfare benefits. Six parents reported that the child who attends first grade was born in Springfield, three mothers reported that the child who is in the first grade was born in New York, and three mothers stated that their children were born, respectively, in Puerto Rico, Worcester and Hartford. Further, in terms of family size, six of the participants have between four and six children, while the rest of the participants have only three. Some of the participants explained that because of their large families there are times when they feel they need to have some help, maybe a male friend to help with the children. One of them stated: "I fled from Puerto Rico because my abusive husband became a threat for me and the children. I will never marry again, a boyfriend... maybe... but that is it."

Five of the participants openly stated that Spanish was the language used at home. One of the mothers said that English was the home language and the other six participants mentioned Spanish and English as the languages spoken at home. The same answer was obtained when I asked them about the predominant language or the language used with extended family and close friends. The only mother who used just English stated: "I am third-generation Puerto Rican and my parents spoke both Spanish and English to me. That was not helpful to me in school. I just wanted to make sure that my kids, and especially my daughter, were fluent in English when they went to school and I made sure that she was."

Five of the participants indicated that their social network is mainly related to the local Puerto Rican community and that when it comes to social events and friends they know where to stay and where to go. Seven of the participants stated that their social events and friends are part of a social

network which includes Puerto Ricans and Anglo-Americans. A mother said: "The city and the school are a community of people and we need to be together for our kids and ourselves. It don't matter if you are Puerto Rican, Black or White. I don't keep myself and my children away from the local community."

Regarding participants' familiarity with the values and beliefs of the Puerto Rican and Anglo-American cultures, six of the mothers stated that they were not only familiar but also comfortable with both. On the other hand, six participants answered by indicating that they were more familiar with the beliefs and values of the Puerto Rican culture. The following are statements illustrating both positions: "If I am living in this city and in this country I believe that I belong to different cultures." Another participant stated: "Yo nací en Puerto Rico, yo soy puertorriqueña. Esa es mi isla, esa es mi cultura..." "I was born in Puerto Rico, I am Puerto Rican. That is my island, and that is my culture..."

There are a number of issues that emerged from the participants' cultural-demographic profile. The majority of the participants are poor, low-income Puerto Rican mothers with a secondary education, some of whom are school dropouts. Participants stated different reasons for moving to the area, with "personal problems" and "searching for better opportunities" predominant themes. Participants' parents occupational history does not reflect a major variation, in terms of their own occupational background. Despite their socioeconomic status, environmental conditions, family life and obligations, some of the participants identified the school as one of their priorities. Further, some of them, despite their educational experiences, indicated that education was very important for them and the future of their children.

In terms of the participants cultural identification and community participation, they were almost evenly divided on the issue. The participants are aware of their language preference and their cultural beliefs and values. Some of them openly stated the need to be active in the community of people of color and some of them reinforced the idea of being proud of their Puerto Rican heritage. This openness about the issue of cultural identification and community participation may offer us a window of hope for the development of comprehensive multicultural strategies and programs, particularly with the schools.

Parents Want to be Involved in the School

This study explored Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's school, and because of the limited nature of their participation in school activities, it is helpful to present some of their answers in order to put the findings into perspective and within the conceptual framework of the study.

When I asked the participants about their involvement in school activities, they were very open and gave me straightforward answers. However, their responses clearly indicated that their perception of their involvement was not the same. Overall, participants stated that they want to be involved in their children's school; unfortunately, they have little involvement in their children's school activities. Several of the participants said that their numerous responsibilities for both their nuclear and extended families, and the lack of support from family members, were serious obstacles to their involvement in school activities. One of them responded:

Nunca participo en la escuela porque tengo muchos problemas. Yo no tengo vida social, yo no voy a ningun lado. No voy a la escuela si me citan y es porque no puedo asistir. Yo no puedo asistir porque siempre estoy en casa, siempre, siempre ocupada, como le dije, mi nieta siempre está enferma, y yo tengo que llevarla a los appointments, o si no hay familiares que necesitan ayuda con los appointments de welfare, unemployment y seguro social. Yo tengo que ayudar mi familia, yo tengo toda la responsabilidad de la familia, solita. Nadie me ayuda por eso tengo tanta depresión, nadie me ayuda, por eso me quiero ir de aquí. No, no puedo participar en la escuela, no tengo tiempo... [P2]

I don't participate in the school because I have too many problems. I don't have a social life, I don't go anywhere. I don't go to the school even if they call me, that is because I just can't go. I can't go because I'm always in my home, always, always busy. As I told you, my granddaughter is always sick, and I have to take her to her appointments, or there are family members who need help with their appointments with welfare, unemployment and social security. I have to help my family I have the whole responsibility of my family, by myself. Nobody helps and because of that I'm so depressed, nobody helps, that is why I want to leave from here. No. I can't participate in the school, I don't have time... [P2]

Most of the parents reported that they would like to be more involved in the school, because they are aware of the importance of being part of their children's learning and development. Unfortunately, the scheduling of school activities conflicts with their own schedules. A participant stated:

Yo participo algunas veces y he tenido problemas con la hora y el día que ellos escogen para las actividades. Normalmente a mí no me conviene. Ellos lo hacen cuando yo tengo que ir a la iglesia. En ésta escuela ellos hacen actividades que no tiene en cuenta las responsabilidades de los padres Puertorriqueños. Ahora, si la escuela de verdad quiere que nosotros vengamos a participar, ellos deberían hacer las actividades los sábados, así los padres pueden participar y ver el progreso de sus niños. Yo sé que ellos tiene an open house, pero normalmente sucede en la noche. Yo conozco otras madres con niños y ellas no pueden venir porque nadie les ayuda. [P6]

Sometimes I participate and I've had problems with the time and the day that they've chosen for the activities. Normally it's not good for me. They do it when I have to go to church. In this school they schedule the activities without taking into account the Puerto Rican parents' responsibilities. Now, if the school truly wants us to come to participate, they should have the activities on Saturday, this way the parents can participate and see their children's progress. I know that they have an open house, but it normally takes place at night. I know other mothers with children and they can't attend because nobody helps them. [P6]

Some of the participants reported that despite their limited and inconsistent involvement in the school's activities, they always come across some problems. One of them clearly stated that for her and other parents the problem with their involvement was simply a language problem-- "too much English and very little Spanish"-- and that her frustration with the language issue helped her to suggest a solution to the school principal:

... yo he venido a las reuniones pero para mí que las reuniones que dan hablan mas inglés que español, y para mí que eso es una de las razones porque mucho de los padres no vienen. En ésta escuela antes había un policía que traducía...que les traducía a los padres hispanos, siempre al final como en dos minutos, para decir lo que dijeron en una hora. Yo se que algunos de los padres se enfogonan con eso. Yo le sugeriría al principal que diera las reuniones aparte para las personas que hablan inglés, y para los padres Puertorriqueños...aparte...separadas, así nosotros tendríamos nuestra voz vendríamos a las reuniones con más frecuencia, así todos entenderíamos lo que se dijo y damos nuestra opinión al principal y a los maestros. [P5]

...I've come to the meetings, but to me in the meetings they speak more English than Spanish and to me that is one of the reasons why most of the Hispanic parents don't show up. In the past there was a police officer who did translate...he translated for the Hispanic parents, always towards the end, to say in two minutes what took place in one hour. I know that some of the parents were angered by it. I would suggest to the principal to schedule meetings for English-speaking people and for Puerto Rican parents... apart... separated, this way we

could have a voice and we will come to the meetings more regularly, this way everybody will understand what was said and give our opinion to the principal and the teachers. [P5]

Some participants said that having a large family and lacking support are the two main reasons for their non-involvement with the school's activities.

Furthermore, they explained that they were aware of the need to be involved with their children's school and yet they verbalized the difficulties that they normally face because of the many children under their care and the lack of help. Two participants illustrated this point, and one of them stated:

No, no participo, me gustaría participar, aunque se me hace un poco difícil. Yo no participo en las actividades como las reuniones que ellos hacen, no he podido participar porque tengo seis niños y mi esposo sale tarde de trabajar. A veces digo si y la persona que me va a ayudar con los niños no aparece. Además yo no vivo tan cerca de la escuela. Yo no voy a las actividades pero he ido a hablar con la maestra cuando estoy por ahí cerca y porque me gusta saber como va mi nena. [P3]

No, I don't participate. I would like to, although it is a little bit difficult. I don't take part in activities like the meetings they have, I have not been able to participate because I have six children and my husband works late hours. Sometimes I said yes and the person who is going to help me with the children does not show up. Also, I don't live so close to the school. I don't go to the activities but I've gone to talk to the teacher when I'm nearby because I like to know how my child is doing. [P3]

Another participant stated that despite her lack of involvement in her children's school activities, she is always ready to help her children with their education.

However, she indicated that the idea of parental involvement and school activities were hard for her to put into practice. She pointed out:

I don't have any participation in the school. Sometimes I go to church and I don't go that much to community things. I'm home most of the time taking care of my kids. I would like to participate and help my kids get an education, help them with whatever they need. If there is any problem

with them I'll be more than happy to participate. But meetings, social and school events, no way. That is very difficult for me. I would like to participate but I don't know how... I would like to feel like a little bit free. [P7]

Three of the participants brought up the issue of safety. They indicated that the school is located in a very "hot" and unsafe area, and because of this they were not involved in the school's activities. According to them, in the area around the school there is a great deal of drug activity and prostitution and these activities make them feel scared and unsafe. Without protection, they refuse to walk through the area during late afternoon hours just to get involved with their children school's activities. One of them stated:

The school should have the meetings in the morning instead of the afternoon or night. They could do it in the morning you know, this is a very unsafe area. I'm scared of going to the school's activities because of that. I know that very few people are really willing to take chances in this neighborhood in the late afternoon hours. In order to participate parents need to feel safe and protected, without that I don't see any participation happening here, you know. It's scary around here, a lot of drugs and prostitution around here...it's dangerous, very dangerous in this area. If we go out right now you'll see a lot of people hustling out there. [P10]

This participant put the issue of school involvement as the school principal's and parents' responsibility. She indicated that because of personal responsibilities, her involvement in school activities is very limited. Further, she brought up the issue of the negative impact that her parents' lack of involvement and interest in her school and education had on her:

I have little involvement in the school's activities. I have a family and a job to take care of. I don't have that much time but I think the school and the principal are responsible for getting Puerto Rican parents involved in school activities. I also think that the problem is in part the Puerto Rican parents. A lot of them don't want to get involved with their children's school...I remember that it happened with me, my parents

were never involved with my school, they were so busy working and they never paid attention to my education, they never helped me and ...you know... I think that was why I dropped out of school and did everything by myself, and by ninth grade I was so tired of the school that I just wanted a break. [P4]

Parents cited a number of reasons why their involvement in the school was so limited. Their descriptions of the many obstacles hindering their involvement were placed on a continuum which ranged from family responsibilities to issues of safety. Participants' verbalizations and explanations of the many barriers they face also requires attention, since some of the obstacles are closely related to the school and others are related to participants' family life and socioeconomic status.

Parents Have Positive Attitudes About Their Children's School, Teachers and Communication

All of the participants believed that their children attend a good school and that teachers care about their children. They gave positive responses and clearly indicated how much they and their families like the school and that teachers have been very helpful to their children's learning and development.

One of the participants said:

A todos en la familia les gusta la escuela, inclusive a los otros miembros de la familia, sobrinos, primos. Sí a todos ellos le gusta la escuela. A mí me gusta la escuela por la actitud de los maestros, como funcionan aquí los maestros. Tienen aquí maestros muy buenos ellos se comunican con los padres y he notado también que la escuela y los maestros se preocupan mucho en el desarrollo y en cuestiones de la educación de los niños y eso es muy importante para mí. [P12]

Everybody in the family likes the school, even the extended members, nephews and cousins. Yes, we all like the school. I like it because of the teachers' attitudes, the way they work at the school. They have

pretty good teachers here and they communicate with the parents. I've also noticed that the school and teachers care a lot about children's development and issues related to their education, and that is very important to me. [P12]

One of the participants who recently arrived from Puerto Rico, and considered herself inexperienced in dealing with the local educational system, indicated that the school was a good one, mainly because it has an Hispanic flavor to it and many good programs. This participant liked the school because of its location, the Hispanic principal, the Hispanic teachers and the school's programs.

La escuela es muy buena porque tiene un ambiente hispano. La maestra de mí nena es hispana, el principal es hispano. A mí me gusta la escuela porque tienen el two-way bilingual program, ese programa es bueno. A mí me gusta la escuela porque me queda cerquita y mí nena está cerquita de la escuela y porque tiene mucho programas bueno; tiene piscina, tiene gimnasio, tiene una biblioteca y le dán musica. [P5]

The school is very good because it has an Hispanic flavor. The teacher of my child is Hispanic, the principal is Hispanic. I like the school because they have the two-way bilingual program and that program is good. I like the school because I live nearby and my child is close to the school and because it has a number of good programs; it has a swimming pool, a gym, a library and she even learns music. [P5]

In their descriptions of the ideal teacher, most of the participants described their child's teacher as close to their ideal. Participants were very pleased and spoke highly of the teachers with references about them made in positive terms. One of them provided the following response:

Un buen maestro para mí, es alguien con carácter, y mucho afecto, tu sabes. Un buen maestro tiene que ser comprensivo también, para que así los niños le cojan confianza y amor. Un buen maestro es como

un segundo padre y eso ayuda mucho a los niños. Yo estoy contenta con la maestra de mí nena porque ella está haciendo un buen trabajo y yo se que ella está ayudando a mí nena con su educación y la disciplina. Muchos de sus estudiantes le van a agradecer lo que ella está haciendo por ellos. [P2]

A good teacher to me is someone with character and a lot of affection, you know. A good teacher must be understanding too, that way the children may trust and love him or her. A good teacher is like a second parent and that helps the children a lot. I'm happy with my child's teacher because she is doing a nice job and I know that she is helping my child with her education and discipline. Most of her students will thank her for what she is doing for them. [P2]

A similar response was facilitated by this mother, who also referred to teachers as second parents for the school's children. However, in her description she recognized her own style in dealing with her children and the educational progress made by her son, thanks to his teacher. She responded:

Bueno, el maestro tiene que tener paciencia, ser paciente con la educación, ser cariñoso con los niños, no ser una maestro agresivo ni una maestro que constantemente esté regañando al muchacho porque allí tendría un fracaso terrible. Porque como todo, si yo estoy siempre regañando a un hijo mio y de vez en cuando no le hago una caricia ese muchacho se va a poner rebelde hacía mí, no va a respetar va a ser un bocón conmigo. Yo pienso que el maestro para mí despues de los padres es el segundo padre de mis hijos. Yo pienso que tiene que haber un respeto de mis hijos hacía él y de él hacía mis hijos. El de primer grado ha mejorado porque tiene una maestra muy buena, ella me lo ha estimulado educacionalmente y lo ha ayudado mucho con la disciplina. Dios la bendiga. [P9]

Well, the teacher has to be patient, have patience with the education, be caring with the children. The teacher can't be aggressive or constantly be scolding the kids because right there there could be a terrible failure. Like anything else, if I'm always scolding one of my children and never show any affection that kid is going to turn against me, he won't respect me and he may become a big mouth. I think that the teacher is like a second parent to my children. I think that there should be respect from my children to him and from him to my children. My child in first

grade has made some improvements because he has a very good teacher, she has challenged him educationally and she has helped him with discipline a great deal. God bless her. [P9]

In general, all of the participants in one way or another made direct references to how “good” their children’s school is. Participants also reported that their perception of the teacher was a good one and that their children have “caring and loving teachers.” Despite what appears to indicate participants’ limited involvement in school life, they still were able to indicate that the school and teachers are vital components in the education and development of Hispanic children. This view was summarized by this participant:

I know that this school is not perfect, but it’s a good one. It’s a good school with solid programs and the school responds to the needs of the Hispanic kids. I’ve noticed how hard it is for teachers to deal with our children. I know that teachers at that school have a lot of patience, and they know how to handle the kids not only with academics but also like psychology stuff... they really know how to work with them. There are some kids with serious problems, academic and emotional problems, and I think that the school and the teachers are trying really hard to help them the best they can. [P3]

All of the participants, in describing their perceptions of their children’s school and teachers, made open references to the role played by communication with their children’s teacher. In fact, they stated that the communication between them and the teachers could play a crucial role in fostering their school involvement and enhancing their children’s educational achievement.

All of the participants in this study reported that at the beginning of the school year they were contacted by their children’s teachers. It appears that this is a standard procedure for the school and its staff at the beginning of each

academic year. This interaction involves setting up a meeting which, according to the participants, serves the purpose of having a personal introduction and explaining to the parents some of the teacher's educational plans and strategies. They also talked about the children's educational development, academic issues, and discipline.

Unfortunately, most of the participants at the time of the interview for this study said that this was or had been the only contact with their children's teacher during the school year. However, some participants reported the experience as being a good one, because they felt "very welcome and respected" by their child's teacher and some described having a sense of "belonging" to the school. One participant said:

Yo creo que la comunicación es buena, lo que pasa es que no hay tiempo para venir a la escuela y hablar con los maestros. Yo creo que los maestros deben hacerle una visita a los padres de vez en cuando. Muchos padres que no van a la escuela a hablar con el maestro es porque no tienen tiempo o porque no quieren. Pero imagino que si un maestro manda una carta diciendo que voy para su casa tal día, yo no creo que uno se pueda molestar. Así los maestros pueden ver el ambiente. Sí porque puede haber problemas en la casa y el maestro puede ver lo que está pasando y lo que está afectando a los niños. [P1]

I believe the communication is good, what happens is that there is no time to come to the school and talk to the teachers. I believe that the teachers should visit parents sometimes. A lot of parents don't go to the school to talk to the teacher because they don't have time or just because they don't want to. But I think that if a teacher sends a letter saying "I'm going to your place this day," I don't believe that one may feel bothered by it. This way the teachers can see the environment. Yes, because there could be problems in the home and the teacher can see what is going on and what is affecting the children. [P1]

On the same issue of communication with teachers, another participant stated that the way she communicated with her child's teacher at the time of the

interview was fine. She also mentioned that, despite her poor record of involvement in school life, she felt strongly that the communication was effective and working. However, she was not sure if recent changes in the school's administration and staff had affected her communication with her child's teachers:

So far the communication with the teachers is okay, you know... they send me letters, and if they feel it's necessary they will give me a phone call. Before they used to give you like dates so you could come and talk to the teacher about your child. I believe like on a Friday, even if there was no problem, even if the child was doing good. I haven't gone in a while and I don't know if they are still doing it, they change a lot in that school... you know, they do. I don't know if they are still doing it... I don't know. [P10]

According to the participants, the most common way of communicating between parents and teachers is the notes that teachers send home with the children. Teachers use the telephone if they know that the family has one. Participants explained that, for the most part, messages are related to school activities, academic issues and discipline. The issue of sending the children home with notes was verbalized and the idea that communication between teacher and parent is a channel to bring up the things that are going well at the school and in the classroom was presented. This participant, who provided a view that echoed that of the other participants, indicated:

I think they should use the phone more often and send more letters to communicate with us. They are always sending the notes with the kids. You know, most of the time the notes get lost. Teachers should have more contact with parents and let them know what is going on in the school before the problem gets out of hand. They should have regular meetings between teachers and parents to talk also about the good things not to talk about the problems with the kids. The school only calls you when there is something wrong or the child misbehaves.

Let's talk about the positive things that are happening in the classroom and the school. [P11]

All of the participants mentioned their willingness to maintain a working communication with their children's teachers. For example, this participant put together issues related to the school's activities, safety and her communication with her child's teacher. Despite her observation about the school's security, she extended an open invitation to her child's teacher to reach out and ask for her help. She also indicated her interest in being part of her child's education:

I wish the school could develop activities where I can go and work with my children. If I want to go to the classroom I have to go to the office first, then the office has to call the teacher. It is a big hassle to go to the school and talk to the teachers, especially my child's teacher. It is a big hassle with the security at the school, remember the school is located in a very "hot area." I would like to communicate and work with the teachers, but I want them to reach out first and ask parents for help, so we can get involved. Sometimes the teachers are too busy and they can't give individual attention to their students. I think that they know this very well, then why? Why don't they ask for our help? [P7]

Participants in this study were concerned about their children's education and indicated their willingness to be part of it. In addition, their perceptions about their children's school and teachers were described in positive terms. Parents acknowledged the efforts of their children's teachers in helping them to achieve an education and improve their academic performance. Participants emphasized the significance of parent-teacher communication, although they spoke of it as being generally inconsistent. According to them, communication is an effective way of fostering minority parents' school involvement, since their involvement had a significant impact on their children's education and learning.

Parents Want to Know About Their Rights in Their Children's School

Participants' responses indicated that they are aware of their rights and responsibilities in the school. Further, their responses and awareness did not speak of the typical middle-class definition of parents' rights, which is reflected in the curriculum, development of programs, activities, administration and functioning of middle-class children's schools. Participants also indicated that they would like to know more about their rights and have greater input in the school's decision-making process.

There were several responses that indicated a number of important issues which allowed the researcher to develop four response categories. All of the participants related their rights to their "being a mother." Most of the participants combined the issue of participation with the issue of decision-making, making both a single topic. Another type of response category was offered by two participants who were born in the United States and attended school here. Finally, most of the participants viewed the issue of their rights as a project for Hispanic parents and teachers at the school, a project where both of them are to assume leadership roles. The following responses will illustrate these views:

Sí, yo tengo derechos. Bueno yo tengo derechos porque mi hijo está ahí y si hacen cualquier cosa yo tengo que saber lo que es y saber porqué lo estan haciendo. Yo soy la madre, y si mi hijo va para algún lado yo tengo que saber. Yo no conozco mis derechos sé que los tengo porque mi hijo está ahí. A mi me gustaría que me dijeran cuáles son mis derechos, porque sin derechos yo no sé si es importante participar en la escuela. [P8]

Yes, I have rights. Well, I have rights because my child is there and if they do anything there I need to know what it is and why they are doing it. I'm the mother, and if my child is going somewhere I have to know it. I don't know my rights, and yet I know I have them because my child is there. I

would like to know my rights, because without them I don't know whether it's important to participate or not in the school. [P8]

Another participant stated that because her child was part of the school, she had rights to be informed about the school's activities and decisions. Although, in her view the principal and teachers are the decision-makers in the school:

Sí, yo tengo derechos, claro yo soy la madre y eso me dá derechos en la escuela. Yo tengo el derecho de ser informada sobre lo que mi niño aprende y de las actividades de la escuela. Yo sé que tengo derechos, pero, yo pienso que los maestros y el principal son los que hacen las decisiones en la escuela. Una vez ellos hacen la decisión entonces informan a los padres. Ellos nos dicen el resultado final. A mí nunca me invitan a esas reuniones y yo no sé, si ellos invitan a otros padres hispanos, no, yo no creo. [P11]

Yes, I have rights, sure I'm the mother and that give me rights at the school. I have the right to be informed about my child's learning and the school's activities. I know about my rights, but I think that the teachers and the principal are the ones making the decisions at the school. Once the decision is made, they inform the parents. They tell us the final decision. I've never been invited to these meetings and I don't know if they invite other Hispanic parents... no, I don't believe so. [P11]

Most of the participants were more specific in their responses, and yet there was not a clear-cut response to the issues of parents' rights and decision-making.

This mother spoke of activities and decision-making as a single issue.

She indicated:

Deberían tratar de envolver a los padres en actividades en donde los hijos de uno vean que uno se interesa por la escuela. Ahora cuando aquí se vaya a tomar una decisión se nos envíe un memo notificandonos, citándonos, a venir a la escuela para estar en esas reuniones en donde vayan a tomar decisiones sobre la escuela. A mí solamente se me invitó una vez, y eso fué cuando se habló sobre el two-way bilingue program. Bueno eso fué relacionado a mi hijo, porque en el área general de la escuela todavía no he tenido esa experiencia... Yo le diría al principal que por favor nos tenga en más consideración por cualquier decisión que se vaya a tomar, si la decisión

le puede afectar a la escuela o no. Yo por lo menos estoy dispuesta a participar con lo que tenga que ver con la escuela de mis hijos. [P9]

They should involve parents in activities where our children can see us caring for the school. Now when they are going to make a decision, they should send us a memo telling us, inviting us to come to the school to attend the meeting. I only have been invited once, and that was for the two-way bilingual program. Well, that was related to my child, because in issues related to the school I have not had the experience... I would suggest to the principal to please take us into account for any decision to be made at school. If the decision is going to affect the school or not. I am ready to participate in anything related to my children's school. [P9]

Two of the participants who grew up and went to school in the United States described their belief that parents' rights are not the same for Anglo and Hispanic parents. Further, they stated that "being Puerto Rican" was an issue with their rights. Both made these observations based on their family-of-origin and personal experiences with the school system. Despite these past and present experiences, participants still hoped for a change and an opportunity to become active in the school's decision-making process. One of them pointed out:

I think that because I'm a Puerto Rican parent I don't have the same rights that White parents have. I don't know why they do, but I know that Puerto Rican parents have less rights. It should not be that way, because we are equal, maybe we Puerto Ricans have nothing in this city. The same thing that is happening with me, it happened with my parents... they never came to school, I think, because they were never invited. I hope that one day the school changes its attitude and they will give me the chance to participate with the decisions...I've never been consulted by them when it comes to decisions. I would like them to ask for my participation to let me know about the decisions, to ask for my advice and help. [P7]

Most of the participants presented a different view. They saw the issue of rights and input in the school life as an Hispanic project, a project which would allow

Hispanic parents and Hispanic teachers to work together on behalf of the children and the school. One mother openly stated:

... aquí tienen PTO meeting la organización de padres y maestros anglos, eso es bueno, pero sería bueno si lo tuviesen para los padres y maestros hispanos. Así los padres hispanos y los maestros hispanos pueden tener una voz. Esa voz puede hablar por nosotros y defender nuestros derechos. Que hagan reuniones entre padres y maestros hispanos y así llevar los puntos que ellos consideren importante a la reunión general. Si ellos pueden presentar algunos puntos específicos yo creo que todos los padres hispanos van a poner atención y trabajar con ellos. Nosotros podemos mejorar la educación de los niños y el bienestar de la escuela. Nosotros estamos informados de las reuniones, a mí me gustaría que nos dieran la oportunidad de trabajar juntos por los niños y la escuela. [P12]

... they have a PTO meeting, the organization of Anglos parents and teachers, that is good, but it will also be good if they have it for Hispanic parents and teachers. This way Hispanic parents and teachers could have a voice. That voice can speak for us and stand for our rights. They should have meetings between Hispanic parents and teachers so that our issues could be brought to the general meeting. If that takes place with some specific issues, I believe that Hispanic parents will pay attention and work with them. We can improve our children's education and the well-being of the school. We are informed of the meetings, and I would like to have the opportunity of working together for our children and the school. [P12]

Participants in this study verbalized their concerns about their rights. They said that they want to know about their rights, in order to participate in the decision-making and functioning of their children's school. Participants provided responses that supported the assumption that minority involvement in the school is not the same as that of their middle-class counterparts. However, they agreed that their involvement in their children's school and public education has the potential to contribute to a more democratic and equitable society, since they recognized that the Hispanic presence in the school is part of

an Hispanic project which exercises specific tasks related to the well-being of the students and the community at large. Participants' responses showed a consistency in their willingness to learn about their rights and their concerns for the creation of opportunities to work together for their children and the school.

Parents Are Proud of Their Cultural Background

All of the participants in this study identified themselves as Puerto Rican and recognized the importance and significance of their cultural membership. Participants proudly spoke of their cultural heritage and legacy. They also spoke of the need to increase the school's awareness of their cultural needs and mentioned the celebration of Puerto Rican traditions. Furthermore, participants appeared to be very interested in their children's education and academic achievement, since education was consistently referred as one of the most important values within the Puerto Rican culture.

The following are the central cultural values brought up by the participants when asked about their perceptions of the role of culture in their school involvement. I will present three basic response categories provided by participants: cultural values, family messages and aspirations, and community involvement.

Cultural Values

When speaking about values of the Puerto Rican culture, participants identified and described respect, education and family as core values of the Puerto Rican culture. These values have not changed with their experience of living in the United States and being described at times as bicultural and

bilingual. All of the participants seemed to agree in their answers. One participant said:

Respeto, familia, educación, y disciplina. El respeto es muy importante en nuestra cultura, respeto a los mayores y a los maestros, tu sabes, para nosotros los hispanos la familia es bien importante. La educación es bien importante porque te permite ser alguien en la vida y nos permite la educación bilingüe y el reconocimiento a nuestra cultura. [P2]

Respect, family, education and discipline. Respect is very important in our culture, respect to the elders and to the teachers. You know, to us Hispanics the family is very important. Education is very important because it allows you to be somebody in life and it allows us the bilingual education and the acknowledgment of our culture. [P2]

Some of the participants acknowledged the many cultures existing in the school and the community. However, their answers conveyed the idea that it is the school's responsibility to honor them or at least honor their existence within the school activities. This participant expressed her views in these terms:

Aquí en los Estados Unidos hay varias culturas yo diría tres. Yo como Puertorriqueña encuentro fácil mantener nuestros valores y cultura. Para mí las tres culturas son completamente diferentes. Yo tengo valores morales y espirituales, la educación es muy importante y nuestro idioma es muy importante. Yo valoro mi cultura Puertorriqueña a pesar de estar viviendo aquí. Yo sé que aquí hay varias culturas y lo puedo ver en la escuela. No sé si la escuela celebra esas culturas. La escuela debería tener la bandera de Puerto Rico, debería tener un día de Puerto Rico como en Nueva York. [P5]

Here in the United States there are various cultures and I will speak of three. As a Puerto Rican I find it easy to maintain our values and culture. For me, the three cultures are completely different. I have moral and spiritual values, education is very important, and our language is very important. I value my Puerto Rican culture, despite living here. I know that here there are different cultures and I can see them at school. I don't know if the school celebrates these cultures. The school should have the Puerto Rican flag, and it should have "Puerto Rican Day," like in New York. [P5]

Family Messages and Expectations

Eight participants pointed out that the responsibility of educating their children was a shared task between them and the school. Four participants responded that they and the extended family were responsible for the education of their children.

Only two of the participants reported their extended family's involvement in the education of their children. This involvement was described as helping with homework, coming to the school for special occasions, and picking the children up from school at the end of the day.

There is a belief that Hispanics by definition are family oriented and that the nuclear and extended family are responsible for family matters, particularly the education of their children. According to participants, most members of their extended family were located in different geographical areas of the United States and Puerto Rico. The city where the study took place does not reflect the living conditions of some participants who came from Puerto Rico, especially those from rural areas; for example, being close and having easy access to members of the extended family. Yet their new status of city dwellers does not take away or minimize the predominant value of education within the family's messages and expectations. One participant said:

Education is very important for me and my family and there is a lot involved in it. There is knowledge, discipline and hard work. I try to encourage my child, help him if he has any problems. I tell him that without education there is no chance to compete in this world. I think that education is the only key to the future, learning is the best thing that could happen to you. [P4]

Each participant wanted the best for her child, whether a profession, a career, or anything that had to do with the improvement of the child's life, anything that may help the child to become a productive member of society, a role model for the family and the community. Parents who dropped out of school consistently and clearly conveyed this family message. One of them stated:

Yo siempre le digo a mi nene que la escuela es buena, que es bueno estudiar, que no se salga de la escuela que ya ha pasado en la familia. Que no cometa el error que yo cometí, no porque yo quise, sino por las circunstancias. Que sea alguien, un profesional. Que sea un ciudadano útil a la sociedad. Que se fije bien para no tener el tipo de vida que yo tengo. Que se gradue, que tenga una profesión, que sea un ejemplo para todos. [P9]

I keep telling my child that school is good, that it is good to study, and not to quit school because it has already happened in our family. I don't want him to make my mistake. I did not want to do it, it just happened to me. I hope he becomes somebody, a professional, a good citizen, a good member of society. He needs to look carefully to avoid the type of life I've got. A professional with a diploma, an example for all of us. [P9]

Participants saw themselves as role models, despite their own limited education and life circumstances. There was an obvious sense of pride in acknowledging the family's hopes in the education of its children. In fact some participants, in their explanation of their idea of being a role model for their children and the community, spoke of their desire to change their lives, to get an education and to get off welfare. One said:

Cuando mis hijos estan más grandes y mejor ubicados me voy a ir a estudiar para terminar lo que empece en el pasado. Esa es mi meta, para no depender de nadie, ni del welfare, esa es mi meta.. cambiar nuestra vidas. [P2]

When my children grow up and they are in a better position, I will go back to school to finish what I've started in the past. That is my goal. I'll get by on my own, I won't need welfare, that is my goal...change our lives. [P2]

Another participant made a similar statement:

I care about my children's education, I help my children with their school work. When they grow up, I will get back to school or work because I don't want to spend the rest of my life on welfare. I need to be a good example for them. [P7]

Community Involvement

Some of the participants showed consistency in their responses when they talked about their limited involvement in community activities. For instance, most of the participants stated that they do not participate in community activities and that their participation in the school is limited. Most of the participants indicated that if they get involved in community events it has to be through their church and their children's school. Again, this is not an indication that participants have made any commitment to be actively involved in community life, rather it is an illustration of the two places where they are more likely to recognize some type of involvement.

In analyzing participants' responses about their perceptions of the role of the community in their children's education, I found two types of answers which categorized two different types of involvement. Some participants acknowledged the positive role of the members of the Hispanic community at the school level. This is an involvement which appeared to foster a sense of pride for the Hispanic community and the Hispanic children at the school. However, other participants said that based on their daily experiences with their unsafe and dangerous environment, they did not see any particularly positive

support nor involvement from members of the Hispanic community. The following statements will illustrate both positions. As one participant stated:

The community is involved in our children's education. For example, the school has teachers who are Puerto Rican and I think the principal is too. There are some community leaders involved with the school. I think that the Hispanic community has a strong presence in the school. That is good because the Hispanic children can get to know them and feel proud about that. [P11]

Three participants presented an opposite view which demonstrated their anger and frustration with some of the members of the local Hispanic community. Again, they were frustrated with the unsafe and dangerous conditions of their neighborhood. One of them said:

La comunidad en general no creo que participe mucho en la educación de los niños. Porque hasta donde yo he visto, especialmente donde yo vivo hay mucha droga, prostitución y perdición. Eso no es bueno para nuestra niñez. Hasta ahora no he visto nada positivo de la comunidad, sinceramente lo que he visto es muy negativo. [P9]

I don't believe that the community participates that much in our children's education. What I've seen so far, especially where I live, is a lot of drugs, prostitution and vice. That is not good for our children. Up to now I have not seen anything positive from the community. Frankly, all that I've seen is pretty negative. [P9]

Participants proudly spoke of their culture and cultural membership. Some of the participants recognized the dynamics of being bicultural and bilingual, and others favored the culturally-bound nature of their cultural identity: language, values and beliefs. All of the participants identified respect, family and education as core values in their culture. Participants stated that their family messages and expectations reinforced their belief in education as a key for

social mobility and family well-being. Finally, participants clearly stated that they did not share the same view around the role of the Puerto Rican community in their children's education.

Summary

The findings presented in this chapter derived from participants' stories and the meaning I made of their narratives. In the analysis of the data, I identified four main themes which helped to illustrate the nature of the issues related to parents' involvement in their children's school and education. (See Table 4.1).

One of the main themes was participants' desire to be involved in the school. Participants are receptive to the idea of being part of their children's education and school activities. However, according to their responses, there are a number of obstacles to more effective and positive school involvement. These obstacles were identified and connected to issues related to their responsibilities with their nuclear and extended families, conflict with schedules, personal safety and the "hot" nature of the area surrounding their children's school. Overall, parents are ready to be involved in their children's learning and education. However, their current level of involvement does not reflect their strong desire. The many obstacles to participants' active involvement does not negate their awareness of the importance of being part of their children's education. Further, the external obstacles impinging upon participants' involvement were closely related to their family life, socioeconomic status, and socio-cultural environment.

Another main theme was parents' positive attitudes about their children's school, teachers and school-home communication. There was a consensus in

participants' responses for this theme. All of them agreed that their children's school is a good school, and mentioned the good programs that the school offers to Hispanic students, the school's strong support of bilingual education, and the value placed on parents' cultural background. All of the participants also reported that teachers care about their children's education. In their description of the ideal teacher, participants identified their children's teachers as close to their ideal. Further, all of the participants said that the teachers cared about their children and, because of this, participants viewed them as second parents to their children. Parents believed that teachers shared their educational goals. In their description of the school staff, all of the participants stated that the school principal is doing a good job and that he and the teachers are viewed as important members of the Hispanic community. This positive reference to the principal and teachers was verbalized by all of the participants as a key ingredient to the Hispanic presence in their children's school. All of the participants agreed when they indicated that communication between parents and teachers is working and that this communication helps Hispanic parents' involvement in the school. According to participants, minority parent-teacher communication has the potential to enhance minority parents' involvement in their children's learning and education, since participants and teachers maintain their bridge of communication and are willing to develop its full potential.

The third main theme was parents' willingness to know about their rights. Participants indicated that they are aware of some of their rights and they all agreed that being a mother and having a child in the school gives them rights. All of the participants said that they do not participate in their school's decision-

making process, and that the school principal and teachers made the decisions in the school and shared the outcomes with parents. However, nine of the participants stated that the issue of rights and decision-making should be seen within the frame of the school as a Hispanic project, where the principal, teachers and parents are to assume leadership roles. This Hispanic project responds to the needs of Hispanic students at the school and to the Hispanic community at large. Within this frame, participants' rights are built into the design of the school's administration.

Another main theme was parents' sense of pride about their cultural background. All of the participants identified respect, family and education as central values in the Puerto Rican culture. Participants proudly spoke about their cultural membership and heritage and identified education as a key value and moving force in participants' messages and aspirations. Parents were aware of the value of education, since they viewed it as the key to their social mobility and their family's well-being. In fact, parents spoke of their present condition and stated that they wanted better for their children. In addition, participants said that they are willing to work hard, get more education, get off welfare, and become role models for their family and the community. Participants want the best for their children and they want them to be and become good citizens and role models for the Hispanic community. In terms of the role of the community, it was previously stated that the school principal and teachers are seen as important members of the Hispanic community, since they foster a sense of pride for the Hispanic students and the community. However, because of some participants' unsafe living conditions and their daily exposure to the drug life in the area where the school is located, they did not have

anything positive to say about the members of the community who are involved in these types of activities. According to parents, these individuals have a negative impact on their children, since they do not provide nor are they involved in anything positive within the local Hispanic community.

Table 4.1 Parents' Perceptions of Their School Involvement:
Summary of Themes

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION					THEME: PARENTS WANT TO BE INVOLVED IN THE SCHOOL					
P.	Age	Educ.	School	Number of Children	Responsible Nuclear and Extended Families	Conflict with Schedule	Language Issue	Large Family and Lack of Support	Lack of Involvement in School's Activities	Personal Safety Issues
1	33	12	PR	3	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N
2	30	7	PR-NY	6	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
3	35	12	NY-PR	6	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
4	36	9	NY	3	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
5	35	12	PR	4	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
6	35	12	PR	3	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N
7	21	10	SP	5	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
8	24	12	PR-SP	3	N	N	Y	N	Y	N
9	35	14	PR	4	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
10	29	9	PR	3	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
11	29	10/GED	SP	4	N	N	N	N	N	N
12	28	12	PR	3	N	N	Y	N	N	N

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Table 4.1 (continued)

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION					THEME: PARENTS WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL			
P	Age	Education	School	Number of Children	Rights as a Parent	Participation in the School's Decision-making	Being Puerto Rican & Issue of Rights	Rights and Input in Hispanic Project
1	33	12	PR	3	Y	N	N	Y
2	30	7	PR-NY	6	Y	N	N	Y
3	35	12	NY-PR	6	Y	N	N	Y
4	36	9	NY	3	Y	N	Y	N
5	35	12	PR	4	Y	N	N	Y
6	34	12	PR	3	Y	N	N	Y
7	21	10	SP	5	Y	N	Y	N
8	24	12	PR-SP	3	Y	N	N	Y
9	35	14	PR	4	Y	N	N	Y
10	29	9	PR	3	Y	N	N	N
11	29	10-GED	SP	4	Y	N	N	Y
12	28	12	PR	3	Y	N	N	Y

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Table 4.1 (continued)

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION					THEME: PARENTS HAVE POSITIVE ATTITUDES ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL, TEACHERS AND COMMUNICATION			
P	Age	Educ.	School	No. of Children	Their Children's School is a Good School	Teachers Care About Their Children's Education	Communication Between Teachers and Parents is Effective	Parent-Teacher Communication Helps Parental Involvement
1	33	12	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
2	30	7	PR-NY	6	Y	Y	Y	Y
3	35	12	NY-PR	6	Y	Y	Y	Y
4	36	9	NY	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
5	35	12	PR	4	Y	Y	Y	Y
6	34	12	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
7	21	10	SP	5	Y	Y	Y	Y
8	24	12	PR-SP	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
9	35	14	PR	4	Y	Y	Y	Y
10	29	9	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
11	29	10-GED	SP	4	Y	Y	Y	Y
12	28	12	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	Y

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Table 4.1 (continued)

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION					THEME: PARENTS ARE PROUD OF THEIR CULTURAL BACKGROUND			
P	Age	Educ.	School	No. of Children	Cultural Values: Respect, Family, Education	Education as Central Family Message	Parents and Child as Role Models	Community Involvement in Child's Education
1	33	12	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	N
2	30	7	PR-NY	6	Y	Y	Y	N
3	35	12	NY-PR	6	Y	Y	Y	N
4	36	9	NY	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
5	35	12	PR	4	Y	Y	Y	Y
6	34	12	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
7	21	10	SP	5	Y	Y	Y	Y
8	24	12	PR-SP	3	Y	Y	Y	Y
9	35	14	PR	4	Y	Y	Y	N
10	29	9	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	N
11	29	10-GED	SP	4	Y	Y	Y	Y
12	28	12	PR	3	Y	Y	Y	Y

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Social scientists, educators and multicultural school counselors have identified minority parental involvement as a vital factor in improving the education of minority students in the public schools (Casas & Furlong, 1994; Colbert, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994). This study explored Puerto Rican parents' perceptions regarding their school involvement and interactions with school personnel, and how those perceptions and interactions can be used to enhance the educational and learning process of their children attending first grade in a public elementary school.

Twelve Puerto Rican parents were interviewed for this study. In-depth phenomenological interviewing was used to illustrate how parents make sense of their perceptions of school involvement and how parents' experiences are viewed and understood by themselves.

In the analysis of the data, four themes were found to be consistent with participants' narratives about their perceptions of their school involvement. The four themes were: 1) Parents want to be involved in their children's school; 2) Parents have positive attitudes about their children's school, teachers and communication; 3) Parents want to know about their rights in their children's school; 4) Parents are proud of their cultural background.

Conclusions

There were four primary questions guiding this study. These four questions were asked in order to have a sense if participants' responses and what they said supported or did not support the research and the literature on

this topic. The first question posed by the study was “What are the parents’ perceptions of their involvement in their children’s learning and development?” Most of the participants reported that they would like to be more involved in the school’s educational activities, because they are aware of the importance of being part of and taking an active role in their children’s learning and development. Unfortunately, there are a number of factors impinging upon their involvement. Participants clearly indicated their concerns about their children’s education and stated time after time their willingness to be part of their children’s education. Parents appeared to echo what multicultural counselors and educators have said about the connection between minority parental involvement and their children’s learning and development (Atkinson & Juntunen, 1994; Carey et al., 1990; Casas & Furlong, 1994; Colbert, 1991). Participants’ responses confirmed the view that speaks of the connection between minority parental involvement and the positive effect on their children’s academic achievement (Iverson et al., 1982; Melnick & Fine, 1990). Parents in this study believed that their involvement in their children’s learning activities at home and school is a shared educational goal with their children’s teachers (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

The second question posed by the study was “What is the significance of parents’ past and present school experiences and their perceptions of their relationship with the school?” Participants’ responses illustrated a number of variations on this theme. Overall, participants provided a number of responses which are related to their present life and family conditions. For example, some of the participants are part of the statistics of the Hispanic dropout population in the United States. In fact, five of the participants in this study had dropped out of

school; one at grade seven, two at grade nine and two at grade ten. Dropping out of school has had a negative effect on participants' lives, since their possibilities for employment and better living conditions have been severely reduced. On the other hand, six of the participants are sharing the same occupational fate despite their high school education. Eleven of the twelve participants are currently on welfare and according to them this is related to their level of education, the economic life of the area, and to some poor choices made early in their lives. All of the participants mentioned the non-existent participation and involvement of their parents in their own school, and some of them pointed to this factor as significant to their decision to drop out of school. Further, two of the participants who grew up and went to school in the United States said that "being Puerto Rican" had a negative effect on their school life. Both based their statements on their family-of-origin and personal experiences with the school system.

Some of the participants indicated that their school experiences were different from that of their children, and that the education they received and what they learned was also very different from that of their children. Participants stated that children today have better educational opportunities, and that there are more educational resources and better technology available to their children.

Another question which guided the design of the study was "What are parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's education?" Participants in this study provided the same type of response for this question. Each of the participants wanted the best for her child, anything that might help him or her to have a chance in life and to become a productive member of

society and a proud member of the Puerto Rican community. Parents wanted to help their children to achieve their educational goals and become role models for the family and the community. They are willing to work hard for their family aspirations and expectations, and would like to use their experiences and knowledge in guiding their children towards a better neighborhood, a better life, and a better future.

In spite of participants' own limitations, they saw themselves as role models for their family and the community at large. Participants shared a strong sense of pride in acknowledging their expectations for their children's education, since education was described and identified as the predominant cultural value and moving force within participants' family aspirations and expectations.

The last question posed by the study was "How do parents view family involvement in educational activities, as they relate to their children's school and learning experiences?" Participants' responses demonstrated that Puerto Rican parents are clear about their view of their family involvement in educational activities. Most of them stated that they have little involvement in their children's school activities. They cited a number of reasons why their involvement in the school is so limited. Their descriptions of the many obstacles ranged from family responsibilities to issues of personal safety. Some of the obstacles are related to the school and others are related to participants' family life and socioeconomic status.

Parents in the study also viewed family involvement as part of the responsibility of educating their children. However, eight of the mothers stated that educating their child was a shared responsibility with the school. Four of the

participants indicated that they and the extended family were responsible for the education of their child. Only two of the participants reported their extended family's involvement in the educational life of their child.

Some parents indicated that despite their lack of involvement in their children's school activities, they are always ready to help them with their education and are willing to go to school and get involved in their children's classroom learning activities. However, they also said that because of issues of safety within the school building, it is not easy to have access to their children's classrooms. Parents were not aware if there is an open-door policy in the school, but they were aware of the many obstacles found on the way to their children's classroom .

Discussion of Findings

Participants in the study produced through their voices and stories a great deal of information about their perceptions of their involvement in their children's elementary school. Participants spoke in different voices, since each one of the twelve narrative-experiences has its unique personal flavor attached to it. Occasionally, they appeared to speak in unison, agreeing on some responses, and at times they had different perspectives.

The numerous obstacles impinging on participants' involvement in their children's school activities have been documented, as well as their explanations for these obstacles. Participants' positive attitudes towards participating in their children's education seems to confirm what the research has clearly pointed out: minority parents would like to be involved in their children's education and school activities (Melnick & Fine, 1990). In fact, participants have described themselves as role models for their children and

the local community, and are waiting for an opportunity to go back to school either to finish or further their education and to break away from their present socioeconomic status. Participants spoke proudly of their cultural heritage and values. All of them pointed to education as a vital and central cultural value within the Puerto Rican culture. This supports the finding that education has been identified as a key cultural value, especially when working with Hispanic families and their children at the school level (Montalvo,1984).

The literature on parental involvement has stated that minority parents are concerned about their children's education and they want to take an active role in their children's education (Chavkin & Williams,1993). The findings of this study showed that these Puerto Rican parents do care and are concerned about their children's education. This finding does not support the unfounded and stereotypical view that minority parents do not care about their children's education and, because of this, have a poor record involving themselves in their children's schooling (Chavkin & Williams,1993; Ritter et al.,1993).

Participants clearly stated in their responses that despite their lack of involvement in their children's school activities, they still want to be actively involved in their education and academic achievement. Participants are ready to work with school personnel (principal, teachers, counselors, staff) in developing a culturally-sensitive communication which will foster parental involvement and help to create a culturally-bound relationship with them and the Puerto Rican community at large. Participants spoke of their strong desire to be actively involved, but this desire has not translated into active involvement. This discrepancy between their desire and their actual behavior might be explained by saying that participants' desire cannot withstand the external

obstacles that impinge upon their school involvement, despite their strong will to be part of the school. It may also be explained by viewing their responses as culturally-appropriate, because these responses are consistent with participants' cultural frame of reference where education is seen as a key factor in the family's social mobility and well-being.

When participants characterized their children's school as a good school, they were very much in agreement with the literature. Reynolds et al. (1993) have indicated that minority parents have positive attitudes towards their children's school and that parent involvement with the school is the major contributor to their children's academic and social adjustment. Participants valued education and their children's school. These positive attitudes of minority parents have the potential to help children have positive attitudes about themselves and their cultural background.

The literature also supports participants' descriptions of the value placed on their involvement in their children's school. Ritter et al. (1993) indicated that minority parents agreed that it is appropriate for them to be involved in their children's education. Hispanic parents tend to trust the school and are less likely to criticize their children's teachers. This was confirmed in the findings. Overall, participants spoke highly of the teachers and indicated that their children's teachers were very close to their description of the ideal teacher. This ties in closely with the literature in this area, which indicated that parents believe teachers care about their children (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Findings of this study showed that participants believed teachers care about their children, and they viewed their children's teachers as second parents to their children.

The literature on minority parents' school involvement has indicated the central role that communication plays between teachers and Hispanic parents. Further, the same literature has pointed out the vital role that communication plays in Hispanic parental involvement and their children's educational achievement (Bermudez, 1993; Carrasquillo, 1991). The findings of this study supported what has been stated in the literature. Participants said that the current communication between them and the school teachers is good and they also mentioned their willingness to maintain a working communication, since they believe that their present communication is working and helping them to be part of their children's education. All of the participants in this study stated that communication between them and their children's teacher may foster and enhance their involvement in the school.

Despite this positive description of the potential of the role of communication in fostering their school involvement, some participants said that language was an obstacle to their involvement in the school's activities. Although most of the participants described themselves as bilingual and bicultural, some of them mentioned a "language problem" because at most of the meetings and activities, English was the language spoken and very little Spanish was heard. Several of the participants offered some solutions to this issue when they spoke of having additional school meetings for Spanish-speaking or bilingual parents. This view is echoed in the literature. Carrasquillo (1991) wrote of the difficulties in communicating with Hispanic parents because of their language diversity and English limitations.

The literature on parental involvement has indicated that minority parents' involvement in public education needs to be seen as a way of

contributing to a more democratic and equitable society where citizens can exercise their rights despite their ethnic and cultural background (David, 1989; 1993). Findings of this study confirmed the above statements, since participants openly spoke of their willingness to participate in the school's administration. Participants' understanding of their involvement speaks of a pragmatic view which is specific and tailored to their needs. For example, parents want to be involved in their children's education and development and want to participate in the school activities. This understanding of their rights and involvement does not reflect the "typical" proactive, middle-class definition of parents' rights and input in the school's decision-making process.

Some of the participants stated that most of the decisions concerning the school are made by the principal and teachers, and that Hispanic parents are simply informed of their decisions. However, most of the participants spoke about the school's decision-making process as an Hispanic project where the principal, teachers and parents are called upon to have leadership roles. All parents were consistent in their responses about their willingness to learn more about their rights and the creation of opportunities where they can work side-by-side with the school administration and personnel, which may have an impact on the overall functioning of the school and on their children's education.

Findings of this study confirmed what the theoretical and empirical literature has indicated, in terms of the positive effects of minority parents' school involvement on their children's education and learning. It was found that Puerto Rican parents are receptive to the notion of being involved in their children's learning and development and also to being involved in their children's school activities. However, according to their responses, the

obstacles to their active involvement were described as external forces which have to do with their large families, conflict with schedules, safety and transportation. This finding explains, in part, participants' current poor record of attendance at the school, and challenges the mythical notion that minority parents don't want to get involved in their children's education or don't care about their school involvement. It also points to the need for school staff (principal, teachers, counselors, outreach workers) to become aware of parents' obstacles and their desire for help with their children's education and their school involvement, as well as their readiness to work on the search for solutions in overcoming their existing obstacles.

Another major finding of this study was participants' positive attitude towards their children's school and teachers. All parents in this study believed that their children attend a good school and that teachers care about their children. Despite this positive attitude, parents believed that the school can do more to involve them in the classroom activities to help their children at school and home. Parents also believed that their educational goals are shared by their children's teachers and, because of this, they want the school and teachers to work with them on helping their children to improve their learning and academic achievement.

This study pointed to the potential role that communication can play between participants and their children's teachers. The need to establish a two-way communication was clearly indicated, in spite of the current level of parents' communication with the first-grade teachers. A good working communication is apt to encourage parents' involvement in school-related activities, since parents will be given by teachers positive information about

their children's learning and school performance. Also, it allows parents to understand the school programs, and encourages home-learning activities built on the common goals of parents and teachers.

Another finding that arose from this study, although it was not the primary focus of inquiry, was participants' positive attitudes towards the school principal. He was identified as an important member of the Puerto Rican community and described as a very competent and well-educated professional who is doing a good job at the school. This positive attitude extended to the teachers as well, since the school principal and teachers are seen as valuable members of the local Puerto Rican community and were described as role models for the Hispanic community and Hispanic students in the school. This view is important, because it can foster a dialogue and collaboration between the school and the community, since most of the participants viewed the school as an Hispanic project which values bilingual education, culture and active community involvement in the school and the education of Hispanic children. According to participants, the Hispanic project has the potential of serving the Hispanic children and their family within the frame of respect and value of their cultural membership and heritage. This Hispanic project also speaks of bilingual education as a right not only to be bicultural but to value the multicultural nature of our nation, where the aim is not to replace one language for another but to celebrate our linguistic and cultural diversity.

This study found that Puerto Rican parents were aware of their rights as parents, but they did not relate them to their children's school functioning or the school's administration. In fact, all of them stated that they don't have a say in the decision-making and operations at their children's school. However, the lack

of opportunities to exercise their parental rights is a reflection of the many obstacles facing minority parents in their desire to have a voice in the public school at the elementary level. This finding is important, because if the school administration wants Puerto Rican parents to become involved and actively advocate for their children's education and their public school, it needs to educate them about their rights and obligations in their children's school and education and help them to understand the relationship between these rights and responsibilities and the quality of their children's education.

The study also found that Puerto Rican parents value their cultural background. Parents spoke proudly of some of the central values of their culture: respect, family and education. Parents indicated the central role that education plays in their family messages and aspirations, as well as their view of themselves and their children as role models for the community. This finding identifies the need to develop culturally-sensitive approaches from the school staff, in their attempts to increase Hispanic parental involvement at the elementary-level in the public school. It also speaks to the school's need to tap into parents' central cultural values in order to increase their involvement in the school and to increase collaboration to solve community problems.

There were several additional findings for which participants were not in total agreement, but which warrant discussion. Two participants voiced the opinion that their lack of rights was related to their being Puerto Rican. Both of these parents grew up and went to school in the continental U.S. Both participants indicated that they based their opinion on their own parents' experiences with the school system and also with the Hispanic community's role in the city where the study took place. However, this view was not shared

by the rest of the participants, who reported a good relationship with the school and viewed the Hispanic community in positive terms.

Another finding was related to some participants' description of the issue of language. Participants described themselves as bilingual and bicultural, with half of them stating that Spanish was their primary language. Some of these parents brought up the issue of having the school use Spanish as the primary language for their school meetings and activities. This finding requires attention, especially in light of the communication between school staff and bilingual and bicultural Hispanic parents, as it relates to their language diversity and English limitations.

An additional finding related to three participants' views on the issue of personal safety and the explosive nature of the area where the school is located. Participants described their lack of involvement in school activities as due to the scheduling of meetings and activities in the evening hours. This finding explained some participants' fears around safety issues and how their fear and the explosive nature of the school's location prevented their full attendance at school meetings and activities. Although the school administration has responded with an effective security system in the building, there is still a need to work with parents in making sure that their access to and involvement in their children's school is not a danger to their personal safety.

Implications for Research

Findings of this exploratory study suggested directions for future research, but also pointed to several questions which remained unanswered. Parents who participated in the study were Puerto Rican mothers; would parents from other minority groups and ethnic/cultural backgrounds provide the

same type of responses or respond differently? Also, would participants have different responses if the format of the interview would have involved participants' families, husbands and significant ones? These issues are important because they will allow us to see if parents from different ethnic groups are facing and describing the same external obstacles to their desire to be involved in the school. Parents from other ethnic groups can also shed light about other barriers and institutional realities that participants in this study did not bring up, such as racism, segregation and discrimination. Requiring participants' husbands and significant ones to participate in the interviews may have the potential to present responses which would speak of the complexity of different views, and perhaps experiences, when dealing with the school.

Since the present study investigated participants' perceptions of their involvement in their children's school, an essential area for future research is to investigate participants' understanding of school involvement and the connection between their involvement and the quality of their children's education. Another area for future research would be to examine participants' recommendations and solutions to the many obstacles to their present school involvement. In the search for solutions and problem-solving strategies for minority parental involvement, there is a need to include the perceptions and understanding of school personnel about the issue of minority parental involvement. This inclusion requires further research in order to develop and create culturally-sensitive models and programs to foster minority-parent involvement at the elementary-school level. This involvement could have a positive impact at the elementary level by allowing parents to be part of the school and the education of their children from the very beginning, and

allowing them to develop alliances with school personnel. The creation of this educational alliance may change the dynamics of the education of Hispanic children and may help Hispanic students' academic performance, curbing the dropout crisis which is impinging upon the dreams and aspirations of the Hispanic student population. There is a need to greatly reduce Hispanic students' high dropout rates, since its negative impact has begun to curtail their opportunities for decent employment and their overall well-being, as well as jeopardizing the economic future of this nation.

Finally, when reviewing the findings and the implications for research it is important to consider the limitations of this study, which were presented in Chapter One. Generalizations cannot be made about all minority parents, as the participants do not represent Puerto Rican parents as a whole in the public school; nor do they reflect the perceptions of minority parents from other ethnic groups. The findings of the study speak of the uniqueness of the twelve participants and their perceptions of their involvement in this particular school. Taking into consideration the idea of fostering the level of involvement of minority parents in any public elementary school, any generalization of the findings can be used as a working hypothesis rather than a conclusion. Working hypotheses generated by this qualitative study can be used to understand in more depth Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their school involvement in their children's elementary school, and to generate ideas and methodologies for further research. School principals, multicultural educators and school counselors in elementary public education can use the findings of this study to generate their working hypotheses at their schools.

Implications for Practice

In terms of the implications for practice, the findings of this study could be used constructively for other schools in their commitment to improve Hispanic parents' school involvement. Participants' children's learning and development is determined by many variables which encompass cultural, educational, socioeconomic, and environmental factors. Elementary public school personnel need to be aware of these factors in responding to the educational needs of Hispanic students and the Hispanic community.

School personnel working with participants need to be aware of the strong commitment of Hispanic parents towards their children's education. This awareness calls for validation and respect of education as a central cultural value within the Puerto Rican culture. A culturally-sensitive response to their concerns has the potential to facilitate and enhance the development of a more effective communication, as well as increased school involvement.

According to both research and practice related to minority parental involvement, multicultural school counselors and educators can create and develop effective Hispanic parental involvement in the public schools. These professionals need to become advocates and make sure that the public school engages in the planning and implementation of strategies that are sensitive to parents' cultural backgrounds and value the meaning they make of their school involvement, in order to increase the overall level of Hispanic parents' involvement in the public school (Casas & Furlong, 1994).

Participants' responses addressed the need for the school to build cultural bridges when working with Hispanic parents and the Hispanic community (Montalvo, 1984). Furthermore, the need to develop a culturally-

sensitive and trusting relationship between parents and teachers has been cited and addressed a number of times. This approach will clearly yield benefits and will foster communication which by definition is culturally-bound (Plata, 1989).

All of the participants reported the experience of being contacted by their children's teachers at the beginning of the school year. This contact allows teachers to introduce themselves and explain to parents their educational goals for their first-grade students. Further, participants reported the experience in positive terms because they felt welcomed and respected. An intervention could be developed where first-grade teachers could use the initial contact to begin talking about the significance of the relationship between school programs and parent involvement. Teachers can talk to parents about their instructional practices and support participants' willingness to be involved in their children's school activities.

Participants in this study have indicated their willingness to support the school and become volunteers in their children's classrooms. Teachers and parents can work together in sharing their expectations about the learning needs of the first-grade students. Teachers can help parents to develop instructional skills so they can become teachers of their children at school and home, help their children's academic and social adjustment, and help teachers with their educational tasks and strategies.

All of the participants spoke of their positive attitudes towards the teachers and principal. They both were described as positive role models for the Hispanic students at school and the Hispanic community at large. In order to have effective and productive Hispanic-parent involvement in the elementary

school, it is necessary to have the active support of the school principal and teachers. An intervention could be designed where the teachers and school principal commit themselves to being flexible and trying new strategies in fostering participants' school involvement. Further, this commitment may target the development of a congenial school environment which will invite, encourage and support participants' active involvement in their children's school.

The findings of this study indicated that participants are willing to be involved in their children's learning and development, as well as the school's activities. Because of the many barriers to effective and productive involvement in their path, the need to reach out to them is clearly evident. In order to generate solutions to begin removing these barriers, an intervention for school staff would be personal outreach and communication. Basic elements of an effective outreach strategy are: a strong personal commitment, warm, caring, honest and respectful communication, and the ability to respect and validate parents' cultural values and educational expectations.

It was found that participants in the study were aware of the significance of the level of communication between them and their children's teachers. Further, participants believed that the communication is working and may foster their involvement. This finding offers multicultural counselors and educators an opportunity to establish a new bridge of communication with Hispanic parents and the community. An intervention could be developed to foster more opportunities to contact parents and hold face-to-face conversations with them in Spanish. These conversations could take place at parents' homes or apartments, in the school or any community site where a parent can be found

and engaged. This approach may help in the implementation of culturally-sensitive ways to enhance and assure Hispanic parents' school involvement.

Findings of this study indicated that participants are very proud of their cultural background and heritage. All of the participants spoke of the three central values in their culture and stated that education has a key role in their family's messages and expectations. Participants indicated their awareness of the many cultures at the school and the need to value each one of them. Participants gave some advice to school personnel about celebrating cultural events related to the many cultures in the school and especially the Puerto Rican culture. In the planning of these cultural celebrations, parents must be contacted by the school, allowing them to be involved from the very beginning as consultants and experts on Puerto Rican culture. Being part of the planning of the celebrations will reinforce participants' sense of pride and allow the creation of a culture-bound type of partnership between them and school personnel. This relationship will encourage and facilitate participants' involvement in the school.

Participants in this study described themselves as bilingual and bicultural. However, some of them indicated their clear preference for the Spanish language in their involvement with school activities. Participants offered a solution to the language issue when they expressed their preference of having school activities only for the Spanish-speaking parents. School personnel can use this finding to provide Hispanic parents with written materials in Spanish about the basics of parental involvement and its benefits to their children's education, as well as information about participants' rights and responsibilities.

In this study, some of the participants mentioned the issue of personal safety and the explosive nature of the area where the school is located. Others mentioned their large families and lack of support. The school administration and staff need to inform Hispanic parents of the attempts made to respond to the issue of safety, and to provide babysitting and transportation for all Hispanic parents who need them, in order to ensure their attendance and active involvement in school activities and meetings.

Summary

This qualitative case study examined Puerto Rican parents' perceptions of their school involvement in the learning and education of their first-grade children. It was found that parents want to be involved in their children's school. However, they described numerous obstacles that impinge upon their active involvement. It was also found that Puerto Rican parents have a good attitude about their children's school, teachers and principal. Participants believed that the school staff shared their educational goals. It was found that communication between participants and their children's teachers plays a crucial role in participants' school involvement and their children's education. It was found that participants have a strong willingness to know more about their rights, in terms of the school's administration and the decision-making process. It was also found that participants proudly speak of their cultural membership and the three key values of their culture: education, respect and family. Education was described as the central value and moving force in participants' family messages and expectations.

APPENDIX A
PERMISSION REQUEST LETTER

Dr. John Howell
Director of Research
Springfield Public Schools
195 Stak Street.
Springfield, MA 01003

Dear Dr. Howell:

I am a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I am writing to ask your permission to conduct a research project for my dissertation within your school system.

My study will explore Puerto Rican parents' perceptions regarding their school involvement in the education of their children attending first grade in your elementary schools.

Parents' perceptions will be explored using qualitative research. Data will be gathered through a structured, open-ended interview. This information will be kept completely confidential.

The results of the study would benefit their children's transition to school, as well as their learning and development. It is hoped that this study may be utilized by the school administration in the future.

At this time, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your efforts and attention on my behalf.

Sincerely,

Luis C. Turriago

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction:

The researcher will thank participants and acknowledge the significance of their participation in the study. Next, I will explain the purpose of the study (see parental information letter and consent form), in order to help participants feel comfortable and to establish rapport. Further, I will explain the interview procedure and inform participants of the two phases of the interview: a) the demographic sheet and b) the interview itself.

1.) Importance-Domain

Explore process of school selection

Information
School selection

Questions

- 1) How did you find out about your child's school?
- 2) Could you tell me the reason(s) that led you to enroll your child in this school?
- 3) What is your family's opinion about the selection of your child's school?
- 4) What kind of advice would you give to a friend who is going to enroll his/her child in your child's school?

2.) Importance-Domain

Explore history of nuclear family's current relationship with school

Information
Nuclear family/school relationship

Questions

- 1) Can you tell me about the first time you were contacted by your child's school?
 - a) How did they do it?

- b) Who is the person who contacted you?
- c) What message did you get from them?
- 2) How was your experience of being at your child's school and dealing with the school personnel?
- 3) What was it that you
 - a) liked or
 - b) didn't like
 about the experience?

3.) Importance-Domain

Explore nuclear family's participation in school activities

Information

Nuclear family's school participation

Questions

- 1) Have you been informed about the school activities?
- 2) Do you participate in school activities?
Yes ____ No ____ If no, please tell me the reason(s)
- 3) When was the last time that you and you family went to your child's school and participated in school activities?
- 4) What was it that you
 - a) enjoyed
 - b) didn't enjoy
 about taking part in school activities?
- 5) What type of advice or activities would you give/suggest to the school principal to increase Puerto Rican parents' school participation?
- 6) What would you like the school to change in order to increase your school participation?

4.) Importance-Domain

Investigate the significance of parents' own experience with the public schools

Information

Description of personal experiences

Questions

- 1) In your opinion, how do you think that your school experiences have impacted on your role as a parent?
- 2) Please tell me if there are any
 - a) similarities
 - b) differencesbetween your school experience and your child's?
- 3) In your opinion, how do you feel that your experience with your school has affected
 - a) your school participation?
 - b) your child's education?

5.) Importance-Domain

Investigate parents' view of extended family's involvement in educational activities, as they relate to their children's school and learning experience

Information

Extended family's school involvement

Questions

Represent

- 1) Could you tell me if there is another family member(s) besides both of you involved with your child's education?
- 2) Has he/she ever been invited to participate in the school's activities?
- 3) What does this person(s) think about
 - a) education
 - b) parents' school participation?
- 4) What advice would they give to the school about fostering their school participation?

6.) Importance-Domain

Investigate parents' aspirations and expectations of their children's education

Information

Family messages

Questions

- 1) In your view, who is responsible for your child's education?
- 2) What are your aspirations for your child's education?
- 3) What do you want your child to get out of school?
- 4) What is the main purpose of education?
- 5) How do you see yourself helping your child to succeed at school?
- 6) Do you think that your child belongs in this school?
- 7) If you had the option, would you change/transfer your child to another school?

7.) Importance-Domain

Investigate parents' perception of their relationship with their child's teacher

Information

Parent-teacher relationship

Questions

- 1) Tell me what you think are the most important qualities/characteristics of the "ideal" teacher for your child?
- 2) What is your opinion about your child's teacher?
- 3) What do you expect from your child's teacher?
- 4) Can you tell me if there is a difference between your concept of discipline and your child's teacher's view of discipline?
- 5) What type of advice would you give to your child's teacher?

8.) Importance-Domain

Investigate parents' perceptions of their input in the school's decision-making

Information

Parent/school relationship

Questions

- 1) What do you think is the most effective way to improve communication between the home and school?
- 2) What type of activities or strategies would you suggest to the

school principal to improve the relationship between you and the school personnel?

- 3) Do you think that as a parent you have rights which ensure your participation in the school's decision making?
- 4) Do you think that the school wants your input and participation?
- 5) What advice would you give the school principal for getting Puerto Rican parents more involved with the school and the decision-making process?

9.) Importance-Domain

Investigate role of Puerto Rican culture in parents' perceptions of their school involvement

Information

Culture-specific

Questions

- 1) In what ways do you think that your ethnic and cultural background affect your school participation?
- 2) What are some of the cultural values that you think your culture provides you with in educating your child?
- 3) What type of cultural activities might you advise the school principal to develop in order to foster Puerto Rican parents' school participation?
- 4) What are the cultural values you think are important for your child's teacher to be aware of/familiar with?
- 5) In what ways do you think that the Puerto Rican community is involved in the process of educating your child at his/her school?
- 6) How would you compare your school participation to your level of participation in other activities (social, community, religious)?

10.) Importance-Domain

Ask for participants' input in study

Information
Feedback

Questions

- 1) Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been asked in this interview?
- 2) Are there any other questions that you feel I should have asked in the interview?
- 3) Could you tell me your overall impression regarding the interview process and content?

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Parent No: _____ Age _____ Male _____ Female _____

Where did you grow up?

Where did you go to school?

What is your level of education?

What is your source of income?

What is your occupation?

What was your parents' occupation?

Where were you living before you moved to Springfield?

How long have you been living in Springfield?

How did you decide to move to Springfield?

Where was your child born?

Who are the members of your nuclear family?

When you talk to your child, in what language do you speak?

Spanish _____ English _____ Both _____

When you talk to your extended family, in what language do you speak?

Spanish _____ English _____ Both _____

When you talk to your friends, in what language do you speak?

Spanish _____ English _____ Both _____

What kind of music, radio and television do you listen to/watch?

Spanish _____ English _____ Both _____

When you go to social events (dances, sport events, picnics, etc.) are the people you go with:

Puerto Rican _____ Anglo-American _____ Both _____ Other _____

Would you say that you are familiar with the values and beliefs of the

Puerto Rican culture _____ Anglo-American culture _____ Both _____

APPENDIX C

PARENTAL INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Dear Parent:

I am a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and am presently working on my dissertation. I am a certified school counselor with three years of experience working in the middle school. Due to my strong conviction that parental involvement in school has a positive influence on elementary children's learning and education, I have designed a study in which you will have the opportunity to be selected to participate.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project that I am conducting. I am interested in learning how your perceptions about parental involvement have an effect on your first-grader's learning and education. Your participation in this study will greatly benefit your child's transition to school, by making you more aware as a parent of what will be expected from your child in the school.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will involve a personal interview lasting about two hours. Because the interview may raise sensitive issues or address personal experiences, you can choose not to respond to a question that might be difficult to answer. In addition, you may withdraw from this study at any stage during the interview, and you are under no obligation to complete it. Further, if you decide to withdraw following the interview, all documents containing your information will be destroyed and will not be used in the study.

To assure accuracy in recording your responses, the interview will be audiotaped; these tapes will be listened to and transcribed only by me. All of the information obtained through the interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be used only for research purposes. It will never become part of your child's school record.

The information you provide will be strictly confidential. Pseudonyms and code numbers will be used to protect your identity and all personal identifying references will be disguised to ensure your confidentiality. This consent form is the only place where your name will appear.

Please be aware that you can ask me questions at any time regarding the study or other concerns. I will make myself available at any time to answer your questions regarding the whole process, and outcomes of the study. I will be pleased to send you the results of the study upon your request. Since the study

is for educational purposes only, results will be shared and disseminated with the academic community and those concerned with educational issues through articles and presentations. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on multicultural interventions at the elementary-school level and help school personnel to find practical culture-specific ways to work with Puerto Rican parents.

Please find below a copy of a permission/consent form for you to complete.

I have read and understand the contents of this permission letter. I have discussed it with Mr. Turriago and have had my questions answered satisfactorily. I give my consent to participate in this research project.

Name and Date

Signature

Researcher's Name and Date

Signature

Thank you for participating in this study.

Luis C. Turriago, Doctoral Student
School, Consulting and Counseling
Psychology Program
159 Hills South
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003

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