

Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in a Racially Changing School

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my parents, Raul and Clotilde Barrera, my husband, Chelton Gibbs, my daughter, Victoria Gibbs, and unborn child.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank God, my family, relatives, and supporters who have believed in me. My Lord and savior Jesus Christ has been my strength and my rock. My loving husband, Chelton, has been understanding, my best friend, and especially helpful in the area of technology. My precious daughter, Victoria constantly brought joy and happiness to my life. My father, Raul who motivated me to complete this program and spent hours editing my work and listening to my presentations and my mother, Clotilde, who is the reason I began this journey. Drs. Brazer, Reybold, and Fox members of my committee were of invaluable help and support.

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## ABSTRACT

### UNDERSTANDING LATINO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN A RACIALLY CHANGING SCHOOL

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Studies of parental involvement have generally not reported perceptions of Latino parents. This case study will examine the views and experiences of eight Latino families from Central and South America whose students attend Dason Elementary (pseudonym) in the Pell Public Schools (PPS) (pseudonym) in Northern Virginia. The purpose of the study is to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in PPS.

The concepts of social capital, cultural capital, borders, and boundaries help explain what shapes parents' ideas, perceptions, and actions about parental involvement. These concepts present different expectations coming from school systems and Latino parents. They also explain the complex barriers that take different forms influencing what Latino parents do as it relates to their involvement in their students' schools.

This qualitative method allowed for interviewing and observing eight families. The data revealed what influences their involvement in the public schools their children attend. Their responses are exemplars to investigate what Latino parents experience and how those experiences form their perceptions of parental involvement.

The findings have implications for school officials, policy makers, and recommendations for further research. They suggest that parents' attitudes and perceptions are influenced by events in their lives and by decisions made by the school system.

## 1. Introduction

The majority of new families immigrating to the United States are non-English speakers from Latin America. Their presence is being felt beyond the traditional immigration destinations in all parts of the United States. The adventurous, and sometimes desperate, efforts of immigrants are the most precious investment ethnic communities make for their children. Their transition from novices in the United States school system to more experienced participants is not a linear path for immigrant families. It requires a drastic cultural and social change, the acquisition of new cultural knowledge, new language, and new values. The transmission of cultural knowledge and values is at the foundation of problems related to the adjustment and academic achievement of ethnically and linguistically different students (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1995).

Parental involvement is important and valued by educators within schools, and it contributes to the growth and development of children. Despite the ambiguity of the term “parental involvement” (I will provide a working definition for this study in chapter 2.), a relationship has been shown between parental involvement and improved academic performance, higher test scores, more positive attitudes toward school, higher homework completion rates, and academic perseverance (Carreón, Barton, & Drake, 2005; Epstein, 1984). There is considerable evidence that parental involvement leads to improved

student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates, these improvements occur regardless of the economic, racial or cultural background of the household (Inger, 1992). The extent to which parents become involved in various aspects of their children's formal education has an impact on the level of academic achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

Building communication in an ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse community requires a strong commitment and dependable collaboration between families and schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Latino parents must feel welcomed into schools, have access to information about their children's rights, and understand how the school system functions (Colón-Morea, Hidalgo, Nevarez, & Garcia-Blanco, 1993). The educational community must develop an understanding of the needs and situations of Latino parents in order to identify the factors influencing their parental involvement in schools (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

### The Research Problem

There have been few empirical studies that adequately address the school, social, and environmental features that affect Latino parental involvement (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1999; Rodriguez, Davis, Rodriguez, & Bates, 2006). There is a need to find out how Latino parents think and what influences their actions in relation to parental involvement.

### *Research Purposes*

This study has explored the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the Pell Public Schools (PPS). (All proper nouns used in this study are pseudonyms intended to protect confidentiality). The inquiry examines how they conceptualize their experiences in the school in their own voices. It explains what parents understand by or do about “parental involvement” in their children’s education. This study also describes the extent of their involvement based on the actions of school officials.

Attention was given to parents’ views of what encourages their involvement in school-related activities. In order to examine the reality of parents’ beliefs, this research brings out the voices of Latino parents. The research provides an opportunity for them to explain their actions and realities, and the examination of their views also provides important information that can help inform educational research.

*Theoretical significance.* This study adds several contributions to the literature on Latino parental involvement in education. On a theoretical level, it gives strength to the concept that there is a need for schools to understand the lack of parental involvement despite the efforts made by the school. Regardless of cultural and linguistic background, parents and school officials can work together for the benefit of students. Involving parents who are strangers to the school system is possible if schools shape the conditions that invite open communication between Latino families and schools. Equity and access shape the conditions that invite open communication between Latino families and the school system. This means that schools need to reach out differently to Latino parents and do whatever it takes to make them partners in the pursuit of Latino student

achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Life for Latino families is an important factor in the parents' level of participation in the school. There are many forces in the lives of Latino parents that serve as barriers preventing them from taking an active role in schools. By examining their reactions and how they have forged meanings, this study adds to the body of applied theory of social interaction that occurs between Latino families and educational systems.

*Practical significance.* This research is intended to inform school leaders about how Latino parents make decisions. This may influence the behavior and leadership styles of school officials (counselors, teachers, and administrators) as they educate students and implement programs to involve parents. PPS is interested in understanding the absence of many Latino families in school activities. They also are trying to find ways to reach out to these underrepresented families. This research may further cause school leaders in PPS to monitor and make decisions differently about programs intended to support Latino students. Fundamentally, it could cause school officials to define their respective needs, resources, and goals to best serve Latino families in its particular setting. As ideas are identified to strengthen their policies, they can maximize schooling opportunities for Latinos (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

*Personal significance.* My readings of the literature, beliefs as a practitioner, and experiences as a Spanish speaking Latina lead me to realize that little is understood about the experiences of immigrant Latino parents as they relate to their interactions with schools. The majority of the literature about the effectiveness of parental involvement on student achievement demonstrates successful partnerships between upper and middle

class European American families and their schools (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Often, however, Latino parents are characterized in the literature as uncaring about their children's education because they have less formal education themselves or reside in lower socioeconomic communities (Delgado Gaitan, 2001).

As an educator of many Latino students from low-income households, I have experienced frustration due to the lack of communication between the school community and students' parents. I believe this research will give some insight into the reasons for the quality of communication between the school and the parents they serve.

As a Spanish speaking Latina, I've been able to communicate with many parents in their own language. Latino parents have often told me that they are embarrassed to come to their child's school because they feel they cannot communicate effectively. These parents said they did not understand school procedures or what is expected of them. They have said they feel comfortable interacting with me because they can communicate with me and through me.

I often communicated parents' needs and experiences to school officials but sometimes their needs were greater than what school officials could relate to or understand. For example, at one school, some teachers did not understand why some Latino parents could not obtain a public library card. I was able to communicate the reasons without embarrassing the parents while enlightening the teachers about the barriers the parents faced. This experience opened my eyes to how little many teachers understood about the families they serve.

This study fits in with my career as a school administrator. On a daily basis I am

faced with making decisions that can impact Latino students. One aspect of those decisions is what I do to reach out to Latino parents to get them to trust us (the school system). It has also impacted areas (the school culture) of my school because I have charged my staff to try to understand why we need to create opportunities for parents to be involved. Also, with this knowledge, I have made informed decisions to assist families with some of their barriers.

In order to fully explore the topic and research problem, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What are Latino parents' experiences with Dason Elementary School?
2. What do various Latino parents in Dason Elementary understand parental involvement to be?
3. How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement?

In chapter two I include some background information on the term Latino and how it will be used. Also in chapter two, the topic of parental involvement is addressed as it relates to the concepts of social capital, cultural capital, borders, and boundaries because they help explain the barriers between families and schools that affect parents' involvement in school activities.



## 2. Relevant Literature

Latino families differ on a number of important dimensions. These include their (a) place of origin and the ecological niches to which generations of their families have adapted, (b) reasons for being in the United States, (c) social class or economic circumstances, and (d) degree of socialization in the values and traditions of their ethnic culture, their acculturation level, and the time they have been in the United States (Lopez, Cree, & Spector, 2002).

The term Latino is a new and ambiguous invention. It is a cultural category that has no precise racial signification. Indeed, Latinos are white, black, indigenous, and every possible combination thereof. The term Latino has meaning only in reference to the U.S. experience. Outside the United States, there is not much talk about Latinos; there is talk about Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and so forth (Suárez-Orozco & Paez, 2002). A primary contributor to the knowledge gap about Latinos is the broad diversity among this group that is often overlooked or ignored by researchers. In this dissertation I use the term Latino to mean families who trace their ancestry to a Spanish-speaking country in Latin America, but not favoring one national origin or another.

Regarding culture, the Latino population of the United States is considerably heterogeneous. The majority of national origin subgroups in North America are Mexican, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans (Suárez-Orozco & Paez, 2002).

Educators continue to struggle in understanding why some parents become involved (based on school officials' definition of involvement) in their children's schooling and others do not (Sheldon, 2002). The next section examines how Latino parents and school officials view parental involvement.

### Parental Involvement

For the purposes of this research the notion of parental involvement will be best defined by separating the meaning between parental involvement at home and at school. Parental involvement at home is defined here as parent-child interaction on school related or other learning activities and represents the direct investment of a parent's resources in his or her child's education (Sheldon, 2002).

Parental involvement at school is when parents interact with teachers and other school personnel. This form of involvement is important because it provides firsthand information about the school environment, allows parents to interact with and observe teachers as they perform their jobs, and enables them to observe their children interacting with other students (Sheldon, 2002).

Parental involvement is not a fixed event but rather an ever-changing practice that varies depending on the context in which it occurs, the resources parents and schools bring to their actions, and the particular needs of the students (Carreón et al., 2005). Schools tend to define parental involvement as either a way of supporting students' academic achievement, or in terms of participation at formal school-initiated functions (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

One prevalent form of involvement is parental assistance at the school—in the classroom as an aide to teachers; in other school locations such as the cafeteria, library, playground; or at special events, such as class parties, trips, or fundraisers. A less frequently used form of parental involvement is teacher practices that involve all or most parents in learning activities with their children at home (Epstein, 1986).

In contrast, Latino parents conceptualize involvement as a means of supporting the total well-being of their children (Reyes, Scibner, & Scibner, 1999). Scibner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) studied high performing Latino schools. Their research suggests that some school staff members believe that parents must advocate for involvement in schools, while others believe that school staff should advocate for parental involvement by taking appropriate action.

For instance, even though Latinos place a high value on education, in their countries of origin the separation between the roles of parents and the roles of the school is relatively clear. Most Latino parents are used to seeing themselves as responsible for getting their children to school and consider it appropriate to leave their children's educational matters to the expert educators. In their native countries, many would rely on the authority of the teachers and school administrators to decide what is in the best interest of their children (Rivera, 1993; López & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

For example, Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1995) studied Latino families from the Secoya group in California who immigrated from El Salvador and Mexico. They found out that these parents had students with a high amount of absences in their schools. The teachers had a difficult time reaching parents who worked late hours to report about the

absences and the fact that the children were behind in their work. Parents, on the other hand, assumed that all was well because they complied with what they perceived as their parental responsibility to provide their children with moral support to stay in school. Thus, they did not contact the school unless the school personnel contacted them.

There are specific circumstances influencing Latino parental involvement. Some Latino parents are less likely to get involved if they feel marginalized as a result of poverty, social and linguistic isolation, prejudice, or limited schooling. Also, if their experience is deficient they will most likely not be too involved. Some examples of deficient experiences are: parents with no schooling in the United States who do not know what to do, or may have dropped out of school because they had difficult or negative academic and social experiences. Sometimes when such people become parents, they may end up in low-wage employment with long hours. They may be unskilled in academics and unable to assist their children or attend school activities, or they may not speak the language of the school. Furthermore, they may have difficulty accessing school resources to assist their children because they have little knowledge of how the school system works. In such cases, getting Latino parents involved in the schools becomes problematic for educators. Involving parents who are strangers to the school system is possible if schools shape the conditions that invite open communication between Latino families and the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Some parents may not get involved at the school if they do not feel welcomed or invited (Sheldon, 2002). Peña (2000) discovered that Mexican American parents in one large elementary school were less involved because of their negative experience with the

school staff. For parents, involvement varied according to their personal feelings toward the school staff or other parents.

There are circumstances in which Latino parents are more likely to become involved. Connecting with Latino parents sends a strong message. Communication is central to parental involvement activities. Formal and informal verbal and written communication between schools and Spanish speaking parents needs to be frequent, clear, and in the language parents best comprehend. When communication is effective Latino parents want to become involved and feel included in their children's education. The best results happen when parents are involved in knowing what to do.

When the school culture creates and communicates an open, positive and welcoming environment parents are more willing to become involved. The school system needs to acknowledge the cultural strengths of Latino families. By recognizing and developing pride in their identity, school officials let parents know they can provide valuable contributions. Latino families need to know that educators are interested in meeting their needs and are respectful of their language and cultural differences. Educators can do this by making explicit the ways they value the language, culture, knowledge, and expertise of the parents in their communities. Parents will then participate more readily. When educators reach out to Latino communities, they influence how the parents relate to them. When parents feel at ease and trust is established between them and the school system, they are more likely to be engaged (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Schools systems have not always interpreted parental involvement in a manner consistent with the literature. Many school administrators and teachers misread the

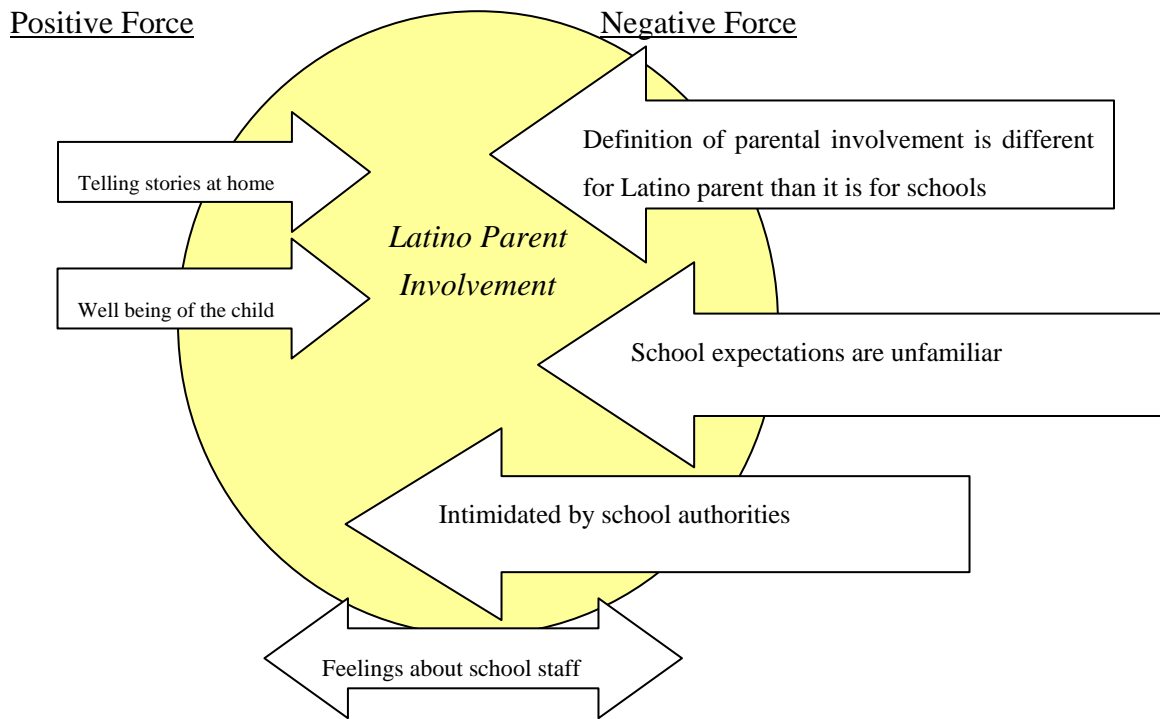
reserved, non-confrontational manners, and non-involvement of Latino parents to mean that they are uncaring about their children's education (Inger, 1992). Disadvantaged parents are especially likely to feel threatened by the authority of teachers, perceived socioeconomic status differences, and their lack of formal knowledge as barriers to participation (Moles, 1993). Further studies discovered that many Mexican American parents believe that they are helpful by maintaining a respectful distance from the education system. For many of them the school represents an alien culture. Mexican American parents respect the role of teachers and are afraid to intervene in the teacher's professional duties (Moles, 1993; Peña, 2000).

Many Latino parents support their children's schooling by providing a strong emotional environment in the home. Latino parents believe that telling children stories about family and personal history motivates them in their schoolwork and encourages them to take advantage of economic opportunities as adults. For example, many Spanish-speaking parents have immigrated to the United States, leaving behind family and facing tremendous peril to create opportunities for their children. This alone is a strong testament to some parents' desire to improve their children's future through education. A rift occurs when the school requires parents to play a role that is unfamiliar to them (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

There are several aspects describing the nature of Latino parental involvement in schools. Latino parents participate in the schools in many ways, depending on the efforts that schools make to connect with the community. Whether parents attend school council meetings, visit the classroom to talk with the teacher, attend school assemblies, volunteer,

or work with their children on homework daily, they are involved in their children's education. What matters is that parents see themselves as active agents in their children's education, both at home and in the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

In Figure 1, the small arrows represent some of the involvement valued by Latino parents. These actions represent the impact at home, but do not greatly impact their physical presence in the schools. The larger arrows represent constructs that repeatedly show up in the literature as largely impacting the presence of Latino parents in American schools. This figure shows that there is a greater negative impact affecting the presence of Latino parents in the schools. The two-headed arrow is on both sides of the circle, conveying that if parents feel good about the staff they will most likely get involved and if they do not feel comfortable with the staff they may not get involved in the school. For example, in Peña's study parents who felt welcomed made the effort to participate in their children's school and those who did not feel welcomed did not bother trying to build collaborative relationships with school officials.



*Figure 1.* This is a model describing forces influencing Latino parental involvement.

In the next section I explain the connection between social capital and parental involvement. The more parents form networks or relationships with each other and school staff, the more connected they are to information that can make a difference in their children's education.

### Social Capital

Social capital measures the value of those aspects of social structure, which are resources that can be used by people to realize their interests (Coleman, 1990). As a social element, it may capture the essence of many sociological concepts, social integration, social cohesion, and even norms and values (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001).

Another way to define social capital is the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of



membership in social networks or other structures (Portes, 1998). Lin, Cook, and Burt (2001) investigated the positive outcomes of social capital. They discovered that it facilitates the flow of information about opportunities and choices otherwise not available. At the group level, social capital represents some aggregation of valued resources such as economic, political, cultural, or social, as in social connections of members interacting as a network or networks. For example, it is the means by which parents can promote their children's school achievement and educational attainment through productive social relationships (Sheldon, 2002).

An additional aspect of social capital discussed by Coleman (1988) is the attention parents provide their children. The American education-related social capital possessed by parents or obtained through their involvement at school promotes school achievement only if parents are able to devote time to supporting their children's education at home. Parent educational involvement at home may include providing help with homework, discussing the child's schoolwork and experiences at school, and structuring home activities (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Unfortunately, many Latino parents are not available to participate or meet the expectations that American schools have, such as helping their children with homework, attending school functions, and actively participating in parent- teacher activities.

Social capital obtained through parents' visits to the school may take the form of information (e.g., about upcoming events or available enrichment activities), skills (e.g., how to help with homework and parenting tips), access to resources (e.g., books, study aids, sources of assistance), and sources of social control (e.g., school-home agreement

on behavior expectations and educational values) all of which can help promote their children's school achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Interactions with other parents while volunteering at the school or attending parent-teacher association meetings can also help parents gain access to beneficial information, parenting skills, or resources available (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In school terms, other examples may include, "parents who go on field trips, attend school festivals, volunteer in classrooms" (Carreón, Barton, & Drake, 2005, p. 467), attend information sessions such as a breakfast outreach or a principal's tea. These opportunities empower parents by informing them of what is going on in the schools. They are also important ways of serving the needs of both the school and the children. Moreover, in a setting where schools and parents work collaboratively, parents feel empowered, and an integral part of the school's community (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

### *Social Networks*

Social networks are defined as the set of social relationships and linkages one person has with other individuals (Wasserman & Frost, 1994). Social networks provide parents emotional and instrumental support, affecting their attitudes and behaviors (Cochran, 1990; Cochran & Brassard, 1979). Social networks are completely outside of school. Many middle-class White parents have strong networks because of their professional affiliations, community involvement, and knowledge of how the school system functions. Disadvantaged families, such as some Latino families, may lack the social contacts and the network ties that are necessary for children to reach their

academic potential (Coleman, 1988; Ream, 2001).

Research suggests that social networks accessible by working class and poor families are less valuable than those of middle-class when it comes to negotiating the particular institutional environment formed by the school (Horvat et al., 2003). This is important because school norms and values have been strongly established throughout history and will likely not change for disadvantaged families.

### *Parent Actions, Social Networks, and Social Capital*

Sheldon (2002) explains that the social context in which families live predicts parental involvement, thus tying together the concepts of social capital and social networking. Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) studied how middle-class White parents' networks provided resources that made it possible to customize their children's educational careers in important ways. Their study showed that middle-class parents contested a placement decision and obtained additional resources for a learning disabled child. In contrast, working-class and poor Latino parents lacked these resources, and did not dispute the school's authority. The middle class parents routinely talked about discussing these types of issues with family and friends who were in the field of education. They used their network ties to secure the desired outcome for their children. Their success indicates an instrumental use of social capital because their interventions represented an assertion of power in an institutional arena.

In the case of many working-class and poor Latino families, networking is organized predominantly along kinship lines and has the purpose of providing emotional,

social, and economic support (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1999). These ties do not necessarily encourage parental involvement in school. The social capital working-class poor Latino families have offers little influence on matters pertaining to their children's education. They do, however, fulfill important functions in areas of daily life. For example, the kinship ties or extended family members often play a crucial role in enabling Latino parents to deal with various exigencies, such as transportation to and from work. In addition, extended family members frequently provide childcare, emotional support, and at times, financial assistance (Horvat et al., 2003).

Some limitations to Latino parents forming networks are their inability to meet when schools are open due to their work schedules, feelings of inadequacy, and parents' own negative experiences (Aronson, 1996). Peña (2000) interviewed Latino parents who said they often believed their attendance was unnecessary at meetings conducted in English because they could not understand what was discussed. Moles (1993) found that for many disadvantaged parents, a serious handicap in supporting their children's education is their limited education and their lack of fluency in English. Many Latino parents experience immigration as a process of isolation making it difficult for them to create social support networks that can sustain efforts in regard to engaging in their children's schooling (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Trueba, 1998). In addition, members of this group, because of their immigrant status, often live with shame and isolation resulting from poverty and lack of education. These factors contribute to distancing some Latino parents from schools because of how they think they may be perceived by school officials (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Latino parents are at a significant disadvantage with respect to

social capital given that they have little knowledge of how U.S. schools function, the practices and behaviors rewarded by teachers and schools, and their rights with respect to educational issues. Furthermore, it is unlikely that immigrant families will develop close relationships with individuals who have this type of social capital (Monzó & Arzubiaga, 2003).

Lin (2000) focuses on the inequality of social capital when certain group clusters are in relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic positions, and the general tendency is for individuals to associate with those of similar groups or socioeconomic characteristics. Portes (1998) argues that ethnic immigrant networks contain fewer resources than nonimmigrant networks and are disadvantaged in the resources they can access. In other words, some Latino parents associate with other Latino parents who have little understanding or influence in their children's school and lack access to meaningful resources.

Parents can significantly influence schools by establishing their presence through constructing relationships with school officials, thus increasing their knowledge of the school's cultural world (Carreón, Barton, & Drake, 2005). When parents know that they have a network with the teacher, counselor, or the principal their good-faith effort to work with the school is encouraged. When parents network with school officials it creates the social capital necessary to form equal partnerships between them and the schools. These types of relationships enable Latino parents to break through the school system's bureaucracy (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

### *Schools' Actions and Social Capital*

School officials may need to provide structural accommodations that facilitate building relationships between parents and the school community. Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) studied parent centers that provided opportunities for Latino parents to meet new friends, engage in networking, and interact with other parents. This resulted in parents discussing their children's successes, and problems; working on projects; assisting teachers; and meeting other parents who shared their interests. Interaction with other parents was a factor that impelled them to spend time at school. As a result, higher levels of involvement in their study showed not only increased probability of informal contact with school staff, but also expanded parents' opportunities to network, mobilize support, and make demands on the school.

In Figure 2 we see many boxes attached to the small circle representing Latino parents. These boxes represent structured and unstructured impediments creating challenges that may prevent Latino parents from going into the school building. Published research indicates that the largest barrier between Latino parents and the school community is their inability to express themselves in English. The concept of social capital in this chapter gives strength to the description of networking actions by middle class parents and explains the challenges Latino parents experience to establish relationships that are efficient for school purposes.

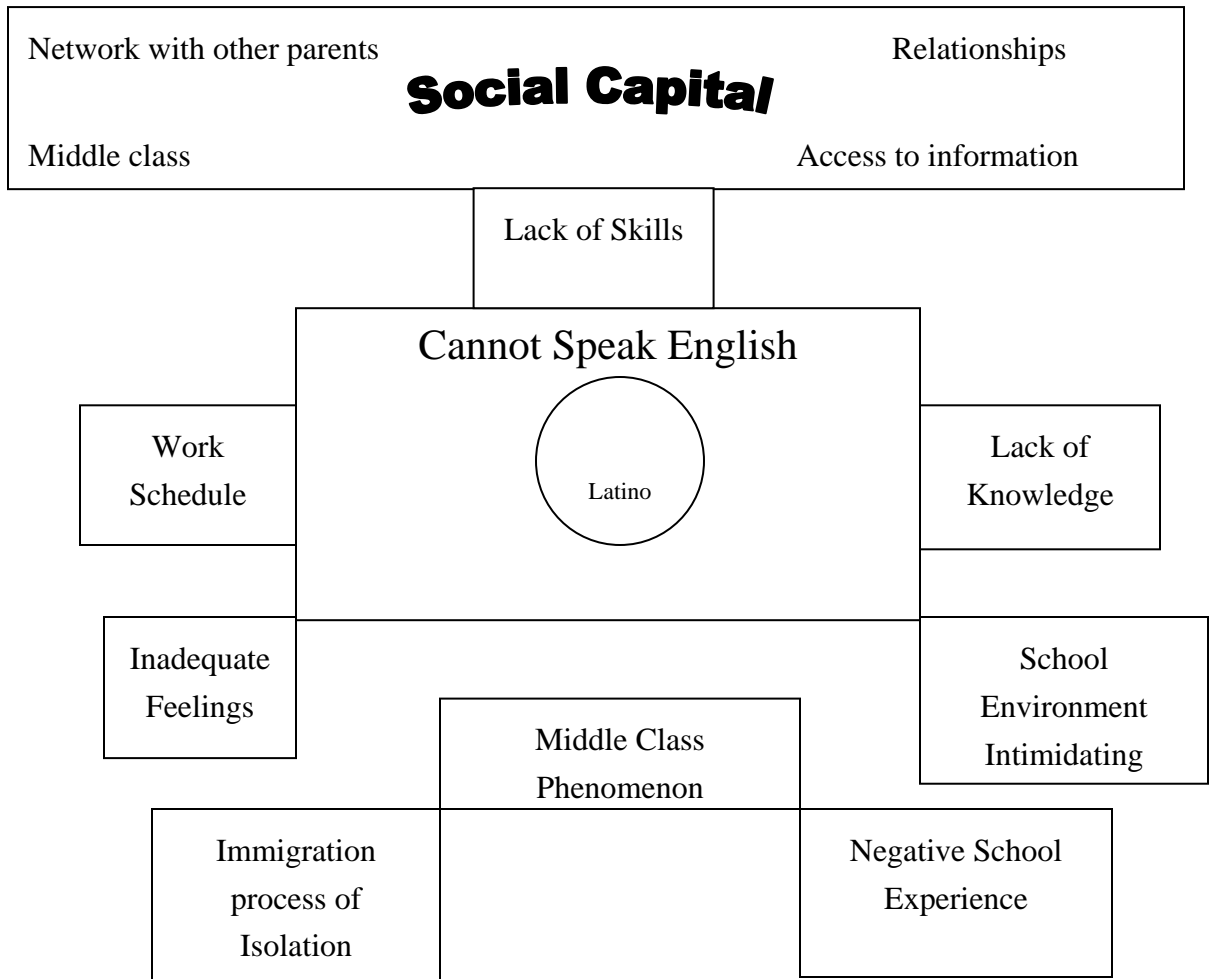
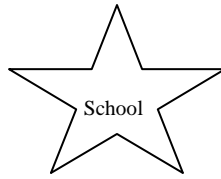


Figure 2. Social Capital explains the barriers between Latino parents and schools.

The next section focuses on what Latino parents and schools value in terms of cultural capital. It further explains some of the barriers Latino parents face when they feel intimidated by the school’s cultural norms and expectations.

## Cultural Capital

Cultural capital consists of material resources, social networks, beliefs, and personal life orientations on which people draw to direct their actions. It describes the linguistic and cultural understanding, and skills that individuals bring to schools on the basis of their social class location (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988).

### *How Schools and Latino Parents Value Cultural Capital*

The cultural capital valued by schools involves prestigious cultural resources (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). Because schooling in the United States is predominantly shaped by European American, middle- and upper-class values, a child from a lower- or working-class background may be less likely to have the cultural understandings and characteristics consistent with the school's culture (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). For example, some students from lower-or working- class Latino families may not be exposed to experiences that many middle and upper class European American students might relate to, such as traveling to other countries, visiting museums, participation in academic and extracurricular camps, or having parents who went to college.

An in-depth understanding of parental involvement requires the study of parents' practices in relation to their cultural capital. Many immigrant Latino parents face the daunting task of structuring new lives for themselves and their families in a culture unknown to them. In the course of this restructuring process they must develop new understandings about the world, establish new social networks, acquire new forms of



cultural capital and learn how to access educational services for their children (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Making inferences in order to interpret behavior in another culture is one level of understanding; being able to identify appropriate behavior and to anticipate change requires a deeper knowledge of a culture (Trueba, 1993). Adaptation to the culture in the United States is particularly challenging for poor and undocumented parents who have difficulty finding a job that pays a living wage and must cope with the physical and emotional stress of establishing a new life in a culture that welcomes their labor but rejects, openly or covertly, their presence (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Carreón, Barton, & Drake, 2005).

The cultural capital that immigrant parents activate to orient their actions often differs from the forms of cultural capital recognized and valued in the school's cultural world (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Chu, 2000; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003). Some characteristics that are of paramount importance in most Latino cultures are family commitment, which involves loyalty, and duty to care for family members (Inger, 1992). Although schools value good behavior, Latino parents value it more than good grades in school. They seldom punish their children for not doing their school work because they leave the academic development of their children to the school system. (Peña, 2000). When children misbehave in school, it is considered a serious offense for the parents. They believe that the family is shamed by bad behavior in school (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1995).

An example of cultural capital valued by schools is the English language. Many

immigrant parents have limited familiarity with English, therefore they find it difficult to understand and express their views and concerns regarding the schooling of their children. Language is an instrument of identity and power. Immigrant parents lose some of the authority they had in their home countries because they lack knowledge of the nuances of language called for in particular situations, such as talking to a teacher or requesting a schedule change (Peña, 2000). Many immigrant parents have to rely on their children to translate with school officials. This alters the natural authority within both the family and the school (Trueba, 2004). Children become cultural brokers by negotiating for their parents and teachers. This may add to the uneasy relationships between teachers and parents especially when parents are already intimidated by educational jargon. It could also challenge communication between them and teachers because they do not understand the meaning of educational terms. These factors limit many Latino parents from being actively involved despite opportunities provided by the school (Aronson, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1995).

#### *The Distance Between Schools and Parents*

Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) studied Latino parents who were able to communicate with their children's teachers. The parents in this study realized that they lacked the formal cultural capital or knowledge to defend their points. While they were able to speak Spanish with their children's teachers—narrowing the gap between the school's and parents' cultural worlds—they lacked an understanding of the school's programs and did not have the necessary command of English to talk about them. This

indicates that language is a gateway, but other barriers persist beyond the language barrier. This demonstrates that even when parents can communicate with the school system, they still may lack the cultural capital necessary to understand how schools work in the United States.

Parental involvement does increase achievement for Latino students but many barriers need to be overcome in order to attain high levels of it (Lopez, et al., 2001). Many Latino parents' inability to understand English makes them feel that no one in the school will listen to them if they cannot communicate in English. Their feeling of self-worth is diminished because they do not understand forms that are sent home and cannot help their child with homework. A lack of literacy skills in their own language can create an even greater sense of helplessness and embarrassment. Illiterate parents believe they cannot offer their children any help, much less support their child's teacher (Quezada et al., 2003). For some, connecting with the schools becomes nothing less than a frustrating situation because they either do not have experience in the school system, or feel isolated (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). As a result they might prefer to stay away from their children's school.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital describes the linguistic and cultural understanding and skills that individuals bring to schools on the basis of their social class and location (Berger, 2000). Many Latino parents new to this country, or those who are unfamiliar with the school system, do not realize what they should ask about concerning their children's education (Maldonado, Rhoades, Buenavista, 2005). Consequently, working class Latino parents may feel less confident about communicating with school staff.

Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) suggested that one way to move the parent-school dialogue forward in a meaningful manner for all involved is to allow parents' life experiences and cultural capital to inform the school's cultural worlds. As immigrant parents gradually adapt their identities and practices to life in the United States, they also influence life in this country, including the cultural worlds of schools.

A critical part of establishing the home-school connection is for the school to engage Latino parents in dialogue and to identify ways they can reach out to each other (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). If schools continue, even with the best intentions, to implement parental participation programs without listening to Latino parents' voice their particular needs and hopes, these programs will remain stagnant and do little to reduce the marked distance between home and school (Carreón et al., 2005).

Figure 3 illustrates the different values schools and parents place on cultural capital including the problems Latino parents face as they strive to obtain cultural capital valued by schools. As they confront these challenges, the arrows show their physical presence pointing away from the school building. Loss of authority over recognized forms of knowledge in a new society and increasing marginalization of their cultural knowledge in turn results in a great distance between the school and the parents. The cultural capital valued by the schools shows the arrows pointing in the direction of the school building. The arrows pointing towards the school, illustrate the pathways of education in this country and what norms are practiced. The figure symbolizes how the concept of cultural capital helps explain the barriers between Latino parents and schools.

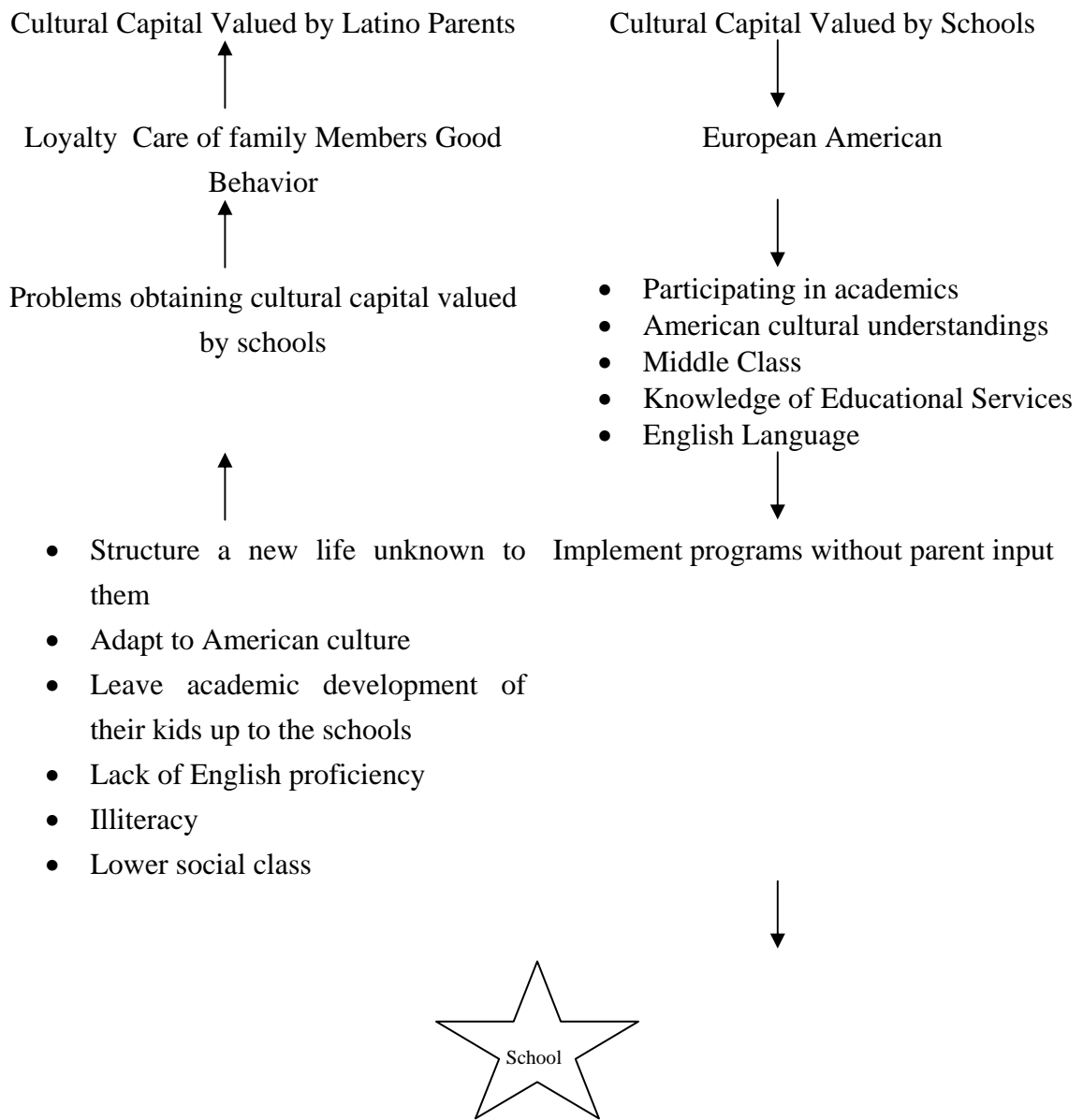


Figure 3. Cultural Capital explains the barriers keeping Latino parents away from schools.

The following section on borders and boundaries highlights the barriers that prevent Latino parents from engaging in school activities. Consequently, it also explains how schools can use social capital and cultural capital to affect parental involvement.

## Borders and Boundaries

Boundaries are defined as behavioral evidence of culturally different standards of appropriateness that are politically neutral. Boundaries exist when students' social and cultural capital worlds are different from their school's views (Erickson, 1993).

Boundaries can be negotiated. According to Erickson (1993), boundaries exist when movements between worlds can occur with relative ease, resulting in minimal social and academic costs.

Borders are features of cultural differences that are not politically neutral. Barth (1969) defined borders as a new complexity that emerges when we see the entrée into different socio-cultural worlds and settings. They are real or perceived lines that demarcate one world or setting from another. Borders function to alert people to the rules and requirements necessary for effective participation within the respective world or setting (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Borders are not inherently obstructive and disempowering, until they become institutional barriers limiting people's access to social capital, cultural capital, and institutional resources (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). When people encounter borders, movements and adaptation are difficult because knowledge and skills or particular ways of behaving in one world are more highly valued and esteemed than those in another (Phelan et al., 1998).

### *How Schools Transform Borders into Boundaries*

When parents and school officials have a relationship it strengthens the social and cultural capital of the community. As schools recognize borders and negotiate boundaries

with parents and their students, they begin to share social and cultural capital. For instance, administrators strengthen community relations as they interact with parents on a regular basis, and schools become more collaborative and caring (Lopez et al., 2001).

The lack of transportation and childcare are major borders for Latino parents, especially in urban neighborhoods. Parents cannot attend meetings if they cannot get to the school site or if they have small children and no support for childcare (Quezada et al., 2003). Schools can use their social capital by providing transportation and child care for parents, thus this issue becomes a boundary. It is a boundary because schools have to face the daunting tasks of budgeting for activities that are socio-economic complexities. Here we see that the need for childcare cannot be negotiated, but what school systems do to help with it can be.

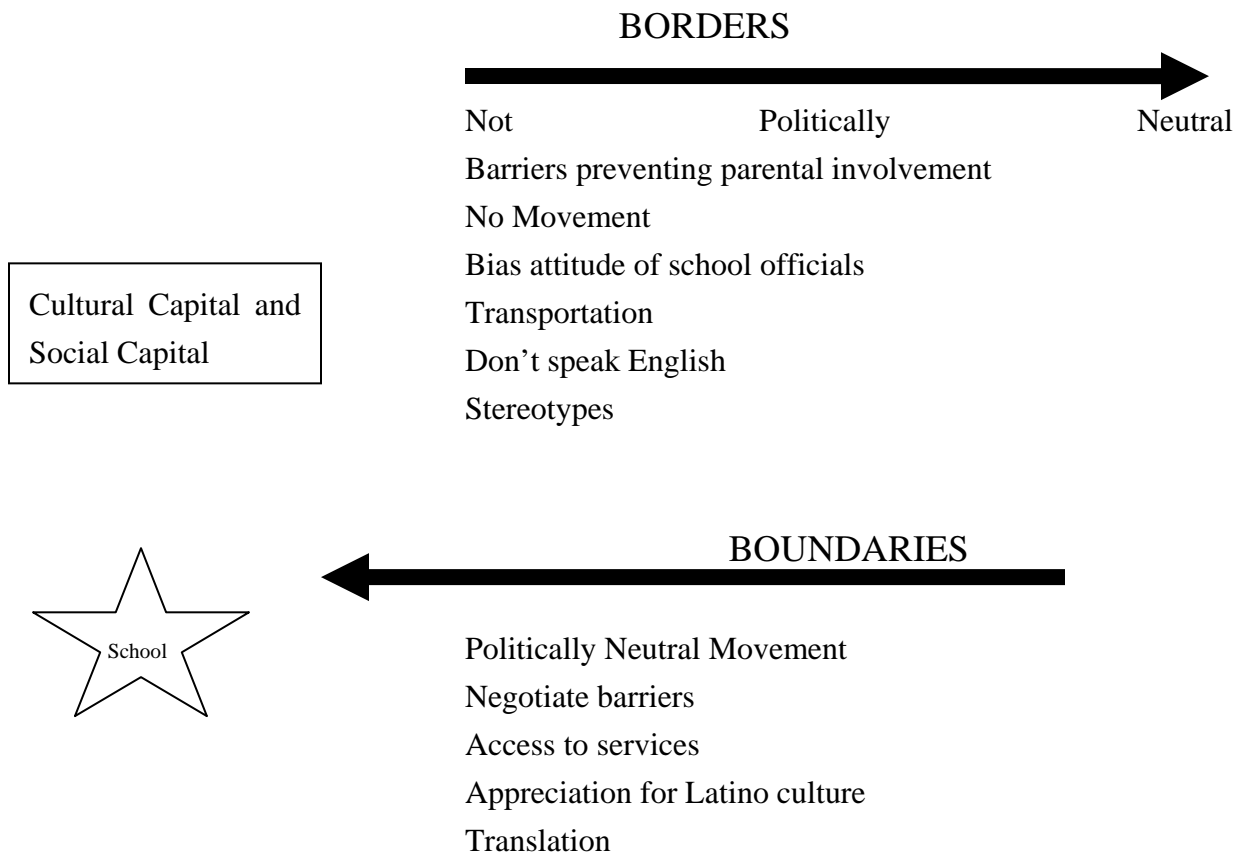
When the disposition of Latino parents visiting the school differs from that of the broader culture, in Bourdieu's terminology, they may feel less comfortable and welcome than other parents, or feel unable to tap the potential of the school's social and material resources (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Unfortunately, the difficulty of getting some Latino parents involved in educational activities with their children can be a border.

Other barriers may include possible biases and attitudes of school officials about either the appropriateness of parental involvement or class and racial stereotypes. These may prevent school officials from treating parents as partners, and thus deter them from making genuine connections with parents (Becher, 1986). These examples imply that the political nature of borders is not neutral. Schools in general still tend to limit parental practices to more formal activities that ignore the cultural perspectives of minority

populations. The schools have expended very little effort to experiment with or develop less traditional forms of involvement that may be more directly applicable to marginalized groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992, 1993; Gándara, 1995; Valdés, 1996). Immigrant Latino parents often experience confusion and frustration within an educational system that not only misunderstands their cultural values and beliefs, but also places additional barriers that impede their full involvement in their children's schooling (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

The arrow in Figure 4, representing borders points away from the school. Borders make it difficult and sometimes impossible for Latino parents to be involved in the school world. Borders cause parents to experience the lack of cultural and social capital schools value to become effective partners with school officials. As the education community develops an understanding of the needs and situations of Latino parents they will deal with boundaries. The arrow pointing toward the school represents boundaries.





*Figure 4.* Borders and Boundaries explain the barriers between Latino parents and schools.

In summary, the concepts of social capital, cultural capital, borders, and boundaries help explain Latino parental involvement in their children's education. This conceptual framework is appropriate because it describes pre-established structures and practices in which schools set standards. It also explains that standard parental involvement opportunities are less accessible to working class Latino parents, and more beneficial to middle class parents. Finally, it explains the difference between how schools and Latino parents value parental involvement in their children's education.

The next chapter discusses how the research was conducted. The reader is

informed about the nature and extent of data collection and analysis. I judiciously examine every action involved in the research, while giving a firm foundation supporting the reasons for the method of choice.

### 3. Methods

In this chapter, I describe the research methods I used to explain how the complex phenomenon of Latino parental involvement at Dason Elementary School (pseudonym) was studied. The methodology used to gather data was qualitative research. According to Glesne (1999) and Maxwell (2005) qualitative research best contributes to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes of people. In particular, I wanted to understand how parents' own descriptions and interpretations explain their level of involvement in their children's school. As a result, my attention in this section goes back to the purpose and research questions. The research purpose is to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the Pell Public Schools (PPS). The research questions are:

- 1.)What are Latino parents' experiences with Dason Elementary?
- 2.)What do various Latino parents in Dason Elementary understand parental involvement to be?
- 3.)How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement?

I believe qualitative research has helped me learn about Latino parental involvement from their perceptions and experiences with Dason Elementary. I have learned about their beliefs by having personal contact with them.

## Case Study Design

I chose to conduct a descriptive case study because it provided sufficient information so the reader does not have to speculate about what I mean (Patton, 2002). I chose to use thick description which includes concrete description of the experiences of Latino parents, the activities they are involved with, and their interactions with the school system and settings. I thought that this kind of description would help me understand the phenomenon and draw meanings when it was time to analyze the data (Patton, 2002). The descriptive case study describes the perceptions and experiences of Latino parents whose students attend Dason Elementary School. I selected these phenomena in order to get a comprehensive understanding of parents' beliefs and actions (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2001). This kind of case study offers a means of investigating complex variables of importance (Merriam, 2001). This was important in understanding Latino parental involvement as I captured the experiences in their own words. The in-depth qualitative inquiry allows me to describe what is happening. The case offers different angles on the meanings and experiences of Latino parents in order for the reader to visualize each situation.

## Data Collection and Analysis

I obtained written and signed permission from the superintendent of the school division to conduct research. Each parent signed a consent form. It was translated by me from English into Spanish. I was able to do this because I am fully bilingual in English and Spanish. I am academically proficient in reading and writing in both languages. I

realized that many families were illiterate in Spanish because they asked me to read the form in Spanish to them. They said reading was a challenge for them. I expected this because of my knowledge from previous research (see chapter 2).

### *Research Setting and Sample*

The housing market has been challenging for the past five years in Northern Virginia. Many Latino families have moved to Pell because they are able to find more affordable housing. Consequently, the school division has experienced an increased representation of Latino students in every school. I also know this from experience because I in the area for ten years. I was a teacher for seven years and have been an assistant principal for the past three years.

The unit of analysis or sample is Dason Elementary School. I studied how this school relates to Latino families. Dason is an informative sample because it represents variables similar to those at other elementary schools in PPS. This particular school has young students whose parents are first generation from Central and South America, and would likely not be too familiar with the U.S. school system. The demographics in this school have changed drastically. For example, five years ago, only fifteen percent of the school population was Latino. Today, they represent more than fifty percent of the school's population. As I reflect on the purpose of this research, which is to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the PPS, it is appropriate to explain some details about the setting.

First, there are unique examples of the actions of Latino parents and the consequences experienced by the school based on what parents do. Many Latino parents attend conferences and activities bringing their entire family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. This is an example of how they spend family time at school. This experience has been different for school officials who in the past mostly dealt with the parents or guardians of mainstream families.

School officials have told me that they refer to the Latino population as a “revolving door.” Each month the school experiences twenty-five to thirty withdrawals, mostly Latino students. They also receive that same amount in registration. This makes it difficult to track longitudinal data on some Latino students. I have also experienced this in the school where I serve as an administrator.

I engaged in purposeful sampling because I am interested in learning about Latino parents’ involvement in schools (Patton, 2002; Merriam 2001; Yin, 2003). I provided in-depth details in order to gain a powerful and increased understanding of the phenomenon versus generalizability (Patton, 2002).

I was able to build a case with sufficient details to understand why the experiences of Latino parents are influencing their choices or level of school involvement. By doing this, I recognize the complexities of their characteristics.

The strategy for selecting the case was criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). When I read Patton’s (2002) description of criterion sampling, it made sense that this technique matched my ideas. I had a sense of general characteristics of Dason because of my connections in the school district. I chose specific criterion to focus on when selecting the

sample. This knowledge added to my reason for choosing Dason. My methodology allows me to describe a much more detailed case.

RQ 1: What are Latino parents' experiences with Dason Elementary? Many parents tell the school officials that they appreciate all that they do for them and their children. For example, it is not uncommon for school officials to provide transportation for these families.

RQ 2: What do various Latino parents in Dason Elementary understand parental involvement to be? The parents like to have their entire family participate in non-threatening activities such as school carnivals. However, they leave the academic decisions up to their children's teachers.

RQ 3: How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement? It is the policy of some schools, (not the district) to make sure that parents have access to all written information. As a result all materials are translated into Spanish at Dason.

Latino parental involvement is an appropriate subject because of the concern for student achievement on the part of both school officials and parents. These are the same circumstances represented in the other elementary schools. Choosing one school enabled me to spend more time building relationships with the parents and exploring the depth of the case. Dason caught my attention for various other reasons.

I previously visited the school to pick up some text books. While there, I was able to talk with the administrators and translator. I observed a few Latino parents volunteering in the building. Dason seemed to be a bright spot that is in stark contrast to what the literature predicted. I was shocked because the literature led me to believe that

the physical presence of Latino parents would be absent in the school building. The experiences I had at Dason piqued my curiosity yielding my search about the parents and programs of the school.

### *Outside Variables Impacting the Dissertation*

The parents displayed a certain level of suspicion about this research. Obviously they did not know me, a stranger inviting herself to ask personal questions about their interactions with their kids' school system. They were also intimidated by the fact that I am a school official. Evidence of this suspicion was they required to know what the questions were about before allowing me to audiotape them. Most of them did not volunteer to tell me anything about themselves or their country when I asked them questions about their culture. Several parents told me that because of the current political situation towards immigrants near Pell County, they wanted to be careful about how much information they would share with me. A new law affecting immigrants near Pell County began after I started writing my dissertation. I will briefly explain the situation for the purposes of understanding the parents' point of view on this matter and how it impacts the information left out in chapter four.

A new local ordinance regarding illegal immigration was activated in a neighboring Virginia County on March 3, 2008<sup>1</sup>. The policy requires police officers to inquire into the citizenship or immigration status of persons who are lawfully detained for a violation of federal, state, or local law. The policy directs police officers to inquire

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<sup>1</sup> The source of the policy was left out to protect the anonymity of those involved with this research.



about the immigration status of anyone they believe is a suspect in violation of federal immigration laws.

### *Participants*

I selected participants based on their representation of the experiences discussed in chapters one and two (Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002):

1. Latino parents- the natural mother, father or both from Central or South America with children in K-4 attending Dason Elementary School.
2. Working class to low income Latino parents, where at least one parent works.
3. Latino parents who do not speak English and speak Spanish.
4. Latino parents whose students have been to at least one other elementary school (to ensure they had an experience in another school).
5. Latino parents of any racial background.

The journey to identifying the parents was quite challenging. After getting approved by the Human Subjects Research Board at the end of October 2007, I quickly contacted several elementary school principals in Pell in order to get their consent to conduct my dissertation using parents at their schools to collect data. This process was more challenging than I ever imagined. It was challenging because not every principal was willing to talk to me or welcome an explanation of the research. Others said they would help me but did not get back to me until months after my intention to begin data collection. Several principals told me they believed that they needed to protect the parents from further invasion due to the recent political changes in social services and laws

towards immigrants in a nearby county. I naively assumed that because of my position as an assistant principal, school principals would want to help me. I later understood their reasons for feeling the need to protect the families in their school. Finally, after I spent two months seeking a setting, the principal at Dason Elementary gave me the approval to collect data. He had some concerns about the kind of questions I was going to ask the parents. I had to send him a copy of my interview questions before I was able to receive contact information or approval to execute observations. He contacted the English as a Second Language (ESOL) teacher and assistant principal to give me a random list of names. I randomly chose names from the list that appeared to be Spanish in nature. There was no further conversation with school officials about the study.

As I began to make contact with parents, the outcome did not meet my original goal of ten families. As a result, I had to network with some of the parents to get referrals to meet other parents. I met a few parents at school events. I also asked some of the parents to introduce me to parents whom they knew.

I ended up studying eight families because only eight chose to participate during the time frame that I set to collect data. They all qualified because they met the participant characteristics that I selected. Also, as discussed in the literature review and conceptual framework section, there are many barriers that made my access to Latino parents difficult. This research could potentially take years to arrive at the point of saturation but for the purposes of completing my dissertation I stopped when I began to see trends, themes, and categories from interviews and observations (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of completing the dissertation, it was feasible to stop at eight families.

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection. This means all opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful information were maximized by me (Merriam, 2001). I was comfortable with this role because of my high tolerance for ambiguity. I simultaneously collected data and analyzed it because of the nature of the design. I experienced the analysis becoming more intensive as the study progressed and all the data was established (Merriam, 2001). For the purposes of this dissertation, the collection of the data is explained separately to provide clarity.

### *Collecting Data*

All data were collected from December 2007 through February 2008. I collected the data through interviews and observations. The use of multiple data collection strategies strongly triangulated emerging findings. Two different data collection methods were employed. The specific processes were the strategies of interviewing and observations. These methods provided diverse ways for me to look at the same phenomenon. These strategies allowed me to gain some understanding of how Latino parents construct their lives and the stories they tell about them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This strategy reduced the risks of definite conclusions and allowed for a more secure understanding of the issues I investigated (Maxwell, 2005; Creswell, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I compared observations and interviews to find out if what Latino parents did in public was what they said to me in private (Patton, 2002).

*Interview data.* I called the parents and made appointments to meet with them in their homes or in the school. Those that were conducted at the school were interviewed in

the assistant principal's office (only myself and the parent present) with no interruptions. The interviews at parents' homes were approximately three to seven minutes away from the school.

Interviewing was one of the most common and powerful ways used to understand the actions and gather the stories of the Latino parents. I asked opinion questions that were aimed at understanding the cognitive, interpretive process, and values of the parents. I also asked feeling questions to get their responses about their experiences and thoughts (See Appendix B). I listened attentively to participants to assess the quality and relevance of their responses (Patton, 2002). The interview questions made sense to me because they addressed my research questions.

During the eight interviews I provided reinforcements and feedback to let the parents know that the purpose of the interview was being fulfilled. For example, words of praise or thank you were used to make the parents feel the process was worthwhile (Patton, 2002). I also provided examples of my own experiences to which I thought they might relate because of my background as a Latina.

My intention was to help build the parents' comfort level, even though I assumed they were skeptical about talking with me due to the current immigration policy in the county nearby (see settings section). I wanted the parents to have a sense of connection with me by minimizing any perceptions or barriers due to my involvement with schools. Speaking in Spanish helped to create mutual empathy. Each conversation was started by me sharing my own experiences as a Latina growing up in Panamá and what the level of involvement by my parents was. I noticed that several parents would nod and say "yes

that is true, I understand.” To me, this was a signal that they identified with me and it provided a segue to introduce the types of questions I was going to ask them formally. I also made sure eye contact was maintained as I spoke to them. I hugged each of them before leaving the setting. I knew to do this because of my own understanding of their culture. All of the parents interviewed told me I could come back any time or call them if I had additional questions. The trust gained from this experience was paramount to further connections to them.

All interviews were tape recorded and lasted at least one hour. I told participants that I wanted to record what they said in order to transcribe and translate it accurately. This practice ensured that everything said was preserved for analysis. I also told them that if at anytime they felt uncomfortable, they could turn the tape recorder off (Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002). None of the parents requested to do this; however, I did have to turn off the recorder twice with two parents to explain the question more clearly and then they allowed me to turn it back on so they could answer the question. Immediately after each interview, I listened to the tapes and wrote notes to make sense of what was said.

*Observation data.* Through non-participant observation, I learned how the actions of the parents corresponded to their words (Glesne, 1999; Creswell, 2002). I also noted body language and other gestural cues, when appropriate, that added to the words of Latino parents. I saw two events through the eyes of the parents. I observed a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting and a special physical education event. Both observations took place at Dason in the evening. These events correspond to the examples of parental involvement discussed in the conceptual framework and literature

review section. Also, by observing what was going on in these settings, I understood and the context within which people interacted. I saw things that may routinely escape the awareness among the people in the setting and discovered things no one else had really paid attention to (Patton, 2002).

I used an observation protocol analogous to the interview protocol (see Appendix C). It included verbal descriptions of the setting, people, activities, and direct quotations. I included sufficient details to permit the reader to visualize the setting (Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002). I paid close attention to what school officials did to involve parents, such as the time of the day they chose to start the meetings, translation, and who ran the meetings (see chapter 2).

In describing the social environment, I looked for how people organize themselves. In both events, school officials ran the meetings. The PTO meeting was translated into Spanish. I saw all parents integrated into the group in both activities at all times (see chapter 4).

In both meetings school officials introduced me to a few parents. After talking to some parents I learned that they frequently attended events. I was able to explore the degree to which the school used and valued the worlds<sup>2</sup> parents brought into the school building (see chapter 4).

During the observations significant artifacts were acknowledged such as volunteer sign-up logs, minutes from meetings, and school news letters within the school building.

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<sup>2</sup> The specific worlds are parents' cultural capital and social capital discussed in chapter 4.

These kinds of documents provided information strengthening the observation. They revealed goals or decisions that might be otherwise unknown. The minutes from the meetings informed me on what the members believed was important data to record. The newsletter, though in English, provided a calendar to remind people of scheduled events. The physical fitness event was advertised in English and Spanish. All of these documents provided evidence of how school officials reach out to Latino parents. For example, the information translated into Spanish gave clear indication of school officials bridging language barriers.

At the end of each observation, I asked several parents for feedback about what was really going on in the given situation. This elicitation or form of member checking (Glesne, 1999) maximized true objectivity which strengthened the reliability of the data because it verified that their perspectives were being reflected (later discussed in this section and in Chapter 4).

Table 1

*Outline and Summary of Data Collection*

Research Questions	Data Collection	Concepts	Justification
What are Latino parents' experiences with PPS?	Interviews Observations	• Social Capital	Field notes from observation at school event.
		• Cultural Capital	Interview question about culture.
		• Borders	Interviewed parents about their skills to help their children with homework.
What do various Latino parents in PPS understand parental involvement to be?	Interviews Only	• Parental Involvement	Interviewed parents about their definition of parental involvement.
		• Social Capital	Interview question about isolation.
		• Cultural Capital	Interviewed parents about their knowledge of the school system.
How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement?	Interviews Observations	• Cultural Capital	Field notes from observation at school event.
		• Social Capital	Field notes from observation at school event.
		• Boundaries	Interviewed parents about access to services.

The outline in this table shows the two strategies were not used equally.

Interviewing was the predominant method of data collection to study the purpose and answer the research questions. The ideas for data collection came directly from the



research questions and conceptual framework (Merriam, 2001).

## Data Analysis

### *Analysis During Data Collection*

As each interview was completed and transcribed into Spanish, I translated it verbatim into English. I reviewed the purpose of my study, which is to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the PPS. Then, I read and reread the data, making notes in the margins. These techniques helped me reflect on tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things to pursue (Merriam, 2001).

I verbally shared my analytical thoughts with each participant in Spanish to make sure I was representing them and their ideas accurately in English. I offered to provide hard copies of the English or Spanish transcripts to the families but because literacy was a challenge for them, they declined. This form of member checking (Glesne, 1999) helped me to focus clearly on the most valuable type of data for this dissertation. Obtaining their reactions helped me develop new ideas and interpretations.

### *Memos*

I wrote memos of my interpretations and methodological questions at the end of each session of interviews and observations. As I collected the data, and analytical questions or theories came to mind, I wrote them down in a separate section to review later. The memos helped document analytic themes. Also, they raised issues about terms

and events (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The memos not only captured my analytic thinking about the data, but also facilitated analytic insights. In the end, they helped me to pay closer attention to what I saw and, thus, to write more detailed, and thick descriptions (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2001).

### *Coding*

I manually began coding data by focusing on the concepts in the conceptual framework section. These codes served as “bins” to organize data. This was the key source for understanding what was going on with the phenomena (Maxwell, 2005). Coding helped manage the data by giving conceptual and structural order (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I came up with the codes from the conceptual framework and from my own notes.

### *Sorting Data*

As mentioned earlier, while data collection progressed, I analyzed the data at the same time. The raw data was sorted into categories. Reading the initial transcripts and the field notes collected led me to write notes in the margins. In my mind, the notes served as a conversation between the data and myself because of the comments and questions that arose. After working through the entire data in this manner, I went back to the marginal notes and grouped them based on similarities. Merriam (2001) confirms that patterns and regularities abstracted from the data (master list) become the categories or themes. I applied Patton’s (2002) suggestion to decide what things go together to form a pattern,

what constitutes a theme, what to name it, and what meanings to extract from the case study. In effect, the categories helped to answer the research questions.

Maxwell (2005) defines the emic approach as a process wherein the categorical schemes are defined by the participants' voices. This approach brought the voices of Latino parents to life. I wanted to know how people constructed their views of the world from what they said. Direct quotations from what people said during observed activities, as well as what they said during interviews were essential for capturing this perspective (Patton, 2002). I arrived at emic analysis because the voices of Latino parents were powerful and vivid.

I also used the etic approach by linking what parents told me to evidence from specific concepts in the conceptual framework (see chapters 2 and 4) (Maxwell, 2005). These notes included insights, interpretations, and working hypotheses about parents' perceptions and experiences relating to parental involvement (Patton, 2002).

As explained in chapter one, the research problem is the lack of empirical studies adequately addressing features affecting Latino parental involvement. In order to address this void it was important to find out what they had to say about the realities they construct.

The findings emerged from my interaction with the data as I deduced possible categories, patterns, and themes leading to understanding how the experiences of Latino parents influence their level of school involvement (see chapter 4). I then worked back and forth between the data and classification system to verify the meaningfulness and accuracy of the categories. Once the information was repeated through several forms of

data collection, it showed confirmation. I interpreted this as successful method triangulation because it confirmed the credibility of the data. No single form of information could be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective (Patton, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2001). For the purpose of the dissertation, I brought closure to the process. This research may take years to be exhausted (Patton, 2002).

### Mechanical Handling of the Data

I used Microsoft Excel to develop a color coded spreadsheet of cells and transferred the sheet into Microsoft Word in order to input large volumes of data. The color scheme helped me to identify emerging patterns more easily. Each category represented a color in a cell. I used the same color highlighters (from my notes) to highlight transcribed text. As the text was analyzed and fit the cell/category, the information was copied into the corresponding column of the cell. In the end, I could look at the matrix to quickly find evidence under specific categories. The programs aided in dividing text data into analytically meaningful and easily locatable segments on one screen. I was able to scroll through columns to find the data that was relevant to each research question. When it was time to develop themes, I easily cut and pasted the evidence into chunks of paragraphs. This method allowed for managing the large amounts of data derived from the analytic categories (Merriam, 2001).

### Validity and Reliability

I discuss validity and reliability as the trustworthiness of the research. The

strength of validity relies on the interpretations of reality accessed through my observations and interviews.

Maxwell (2005) pursues validity in a straightforward way referring to the correctness or credibility of the research. It is concerned with the extent to which the findings can be applied to other cases (Merriam, 2001 & Patton, 2002). The findings of this study may be applied to another because I provided very detailed descriptions of the case study in order for the reader to make clearer judgments on applying the findings to other situations (Merriam, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Reliability refers to the extent to which the findings make sense (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I believe the process of this study is consistent and will be reasonably stable over time. I described in detail the way data was collected and how categories and conclusions were derived (Merriam, 2001) (see above and chapter 5).

Since I am the primary instrument for data collection, the data were filtered through me subjectively. I knew that my personal views needed to be addressed as I conducted the research.

One of the ways that I dealt with these forces was meeting every Thursday for two months in the doctoral advanced qualitative research methods class at George Mason University, where I discussed emerging themes and other aspects of my research with knowledgeable colleagues. It was helpful to discuss my research with others because I did not have to rely solely on my own interpretation of the data.

Also, a fellow student completing her dissertation reviewed the data codes and categories to make sure they made sense to someone else. That experience was helpful

because I was able to consolidate categories and rename codes in ways that made more sense. There were places where she suggested that I needed more work and organization. For example, I altered the codes by collapsing the larger codes into smaller ones because they were directly related. I was able to change the codes to make them more specific. In time, the similarities came to represent clusters of concepts that eventually became hierarchical classifications (Smith, 1979). This experience reassured me that the codes and categories were not based solely on my interpretation.

### *Pilot Study*

In order to address researcher's subjectivity, I separated my values and expectations from the research. An example of this was checking for language discrepancies. I conducted a pilot study at my work site to accomplish that task. This was important because of the cultural context to ensure consistency in meaning across English and Spanish. It was important to use words that reflected the same idiomatic definitions across subcultures.

As soon as I got the approval to conduct research, a parent from my school was identified to participate in a pilot study<sup>3</sup>. I asked the parent, Mrs. Aurora if I could ask her some questions. She is from Venezuela and had been in the United States for approximately one year. I told her the purpose was to have her prescreen the types of questions to make sure that they were clear to her and that the language was appropriate for Latino parents. She agreed to be interviewed in my office. I started by reading each

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<sup>3</sup> The pilot study took place at my work site.

question. The reason I asked to interview her is because I noticed that she attended many of the functions that my school had for ESOL parents. While attending, she always asked questions. Mrs. Aurora was not familiar with the United States school system and was always looking for ways to get involved. She was not working at the time and had a flexible schedule. I asked her all the interview questions. She told me the questions were clear and she did not have any concerns. I then felt that it was appropriate to apply the use of my interview protocol.

### Validity in Action

Some realities that led to subjectivity are: I am a Latina from Central America (Panamá). I had to be careful when identifying categories. I had to make sure that I was not finding themes based on my own experiences.

I purposely worked towards not making assumptions of the participants based on my own experiences. I was attuned to my emotions by taking note of them through memos. This helped identify when subjectivity was being engaged and assisted in producing trustworthy interpretations. Keeping memos about my feelings helped me explore them and I was able to understand what they were telling me. For example, whenever I noticed that parents did not fit a negative stereotype that I learned from my studies, I would feel happy. These experiences taught me about who I am in relationship to what I was learning. By understanding this I was able to be more aware of my emotions. Instead of suppressing my feelings, I used them to inquire into perspectives and interpretations to shape new questions through re-examining my assumptions

(Glesne, 1999; Maxwell, 2005). I shared my interpretation with the parents in Spanish to make sure that what they told me and what I saw was their reality (Glesne, 1999). This was helpful to maintain an accurate description of the experiences of the parents.

As an assistant principal in PPS, I serve a population similar to Dason. My views on parental involvement are influenced in similar ways as discussed in Chapter 2 about school officials; as a result, I kept a daily journal about my experiences with Latino parents and what their experiences looked like from my perspective. As I monitored my perspectives I tried to see and detect anything I would not normally notice. An example of this was changing my mind concerning my opinion about the absence of parents' presence in the school setting. I recognized that where parents live in relationship to the school can impact their presence at school events. By interviewing families that lived close to Dason and were involved with school activities, I learned that their access to the school building was easier than the Latino parents that I had daily interactions with. This kind of process equipped me to monitor my own subjectivity and also my conduct as a researcher.

### Ethics

I engaged in ethical practices based on the American Educational Research Association (2004) standards. I strived to protect the population studied in order to maintain the integrity of the research. My dissertation committee at George Mason University evaluated this research for its ethical and scientific adequacy. No part of this research was fabricated, falsified, or misrepresented. I did not use my profession to obtain any economic or professional advantage from colleagues or any others. I have maintained



the confidentiality of the participants through the use of pseudonyms and have informed them of any likely risks involved in the research. I am also mindful of cultural, religious, gender, and other significant differences with the research population throughout the entire process.

In summary, this chapter justifies the reasons for choosing the research method and illustrates each step performed in the research process. My main goal was to minimize the errors and biases in this dissertation. I thus conducted every step of this research as if an auditor were looking over my shoulder (Yin, 2002).

Chapter 4 explains the findings from the data. Some of the data supports what I found in published research and some does not. It discusses the portrayal of Latino parents from Dason Elementary who were interviewed and observed, in terms of how they conceptualize their experience in the school; how they interpret parental involvement and what they do about it; and how, to what extent, and with what (perceived) consequences the choices school officials make affect their involvement.

## 4. Results

As discussed in Chapter 3, eight families were interviewed during eight separate sessions of at least one-hour interviews; all eight interviews included eight mothers and one father. All families are from Central America, none speak English, all have low paying jobs, and their children have been to one other school in Pell or out of State. Several parents indicated that they were not comfortable talking about themselves because of the current political issues near Pell County. As a result, I decided it was not conducive to include data such as national background, educational attainment, residency, or specific socio-economic status. Some of this information will be obvious from their responses to the interview questions but not from any direct questions I asked them. All of the quotes have been translated by me from Spanish to English.

### Background

The organizational scheme in this section addresses how the data supports the concepts of social capital, cultural capital, border and boundaries found from the conceptual framework in chapter two. Together, they explain the answers to the research questions.

Bourdieu (1977) reminds us that social capital relates to the resources developed

through participation in social networks and the activation or magnification of those resources for social benefits. Bourdieu (1986) outline cultural capital referring to cultural knowledge and artifacts such as literature, music, dance forms, art, historical sites, museums, and the like. The functions of social and cultural capital in schools are to mediate the social reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

### *Social Capital Identified from Interviews*

Dason Elementary gives Latino parents access to social capital. School officials are situated to create or locate moments of social membership. Dason has introduced parents to resources that include access to social networks, relationships, information, and help with language barriers.

Mr. and Mrs. Rivera communicate with school officials by telephone with someone who can speak Spanish. The school interpreters and English as a second language teacher have had a major impact on this family. Mrs. Rivera explained:

They tell the girl and she translates everything whenever anyone needs to talk to me. When the teachers send books for the kids to read for twenty minutes, I am on them to make them do it. I am also on them to make them do their homework.

The school also sends home written information in Spanish. These parents depend on the school system to initiate communication with them.

Mrs. Maraca believes parental involvement means to make sure her daughter is successful at school. She sees her role as paying attention to everything involving her daughter's education. The school system provides resources and opportunities for her to

do this while facilitating her participation so she can support school policy. She explains, “I think it is important to be involved in everything with my daughter, her education, and her conduct. When they have meetings for parents, I do ask permission from my job to attend.” Mrs. Maraca takes an active role in her daughter’s education with respect to school work. She states, “the first thing I do when she comes home is to go through her book bag, then ask about her homework.” She faithfully signs the school form to let the teacher know that her daughter has read each day. The school clearly finds ways to involve parents in the accountability process for their children’s academic work. Mrs. Maraca further explains:

If there is any problem, the administrators calls me immediately, in other words they are very in tuned to the needs of the children. They are always sending home papers informing us of what is going on with our kids, they are always asking for volunteers. When school started they called us to get to know us the parents, child, and teachers. We had to write on paper a description of what kinds of child we have. The previous school did not do that. My daughter has done very well here. Because of their influence if they ask me to collaborate in any way I will. I like to know how my daughter is doing.

The communication bridge between parents and teachers builds social capital for parents because they clearly comply with the school’s policies of helping their children with their homework and making sure they are reading. These parents are informed about what is expected by their children’s teachers either through notes sent home or by the parents attending meetings. These opportunities clearly allow parents to share the same

social norms and practices as the school system. They also act upon what is expected of them in these examples.

The choices school officials make to communicate with parents in their home language encourages parents to want to get involved. Mrs. Rosario is more confident with this school than her daughter's last school because of the communication in Spanish:

Here I am more independent because I understand for myself and I understand Spanish. The next time something happens I will need to communicate with the school or go directly there. Communication is important to solve problems. I feel comfortable going to the school. I am experimenting in this school I don't know if I have a voice because we are new. I used to attend events at their previous school but I did not understand anything that was going on, there was no one to interpret but I still went to meetings, I continued to attend. At Dason they make me feel free to express myself because I can understand the meetings.

This is an example of social membership. When parents can communicate and understand what is going on in a school event, they become members of the school community. When this happens they reap social benefits because they are aware of what is expected and happening in their children's school (Monkam, Ronald, &Théraméne, 2005).

Some parents experience social capital through direct networking with other parents and or school staff. Parents' interactions create access to knowledge and resources. They are no strangers to each other and some have a relationship outside of the school walls. They depend on each other for diverse purposes. Out of all the parents Mrs.

Ayala lives the closest to the school. In fact, she lives directly across the street from the school; as a result she is able to walk to school events. She has met many other Latino parents at the events. Mrs. Ayala explained: “To find out what is going on in school and to find out when school is being closed. It has helped to communicate with other parents. We help each other.” In this example we see social capital enabling Mrs. Ayala’s relationships with other parents and the social benefits it produces.

Mrs. Ayala identified key factors about her experience with her daughter’s teachers:

I feel welcomed. The teachers help us and explain how the kids are doing.

Sometimes I will ask if I do not understand something. I will ask my daughter to let the teacher know and she will call me.

These experiences have helped Mrs. Ayala develop a better understanding of how the school system works. The interaction she has with her daughter’s teachers and other parents suggest opportunities for her to build social capital.

Mrs. Carlota has an effective network group. She networks with other parents in the school by telling them to come to events and encourages them to volunteer: “I started speaking to other Latina moms and we started going in a group. I would tell other mothers when we would leave our kids. We would talk about where each of us is from like what country.” Mrs. Carlota and her network of parents talk about school events, teachers, and their students. She has a foundation of trust and comfort with them. Through such opportunities parents are able to support one another.

When Mrs. Carlota’s children were in Head Start in another Virginia county, she

learned the importance of getting into the school community and participating. Each time the director of the program asked for volunteers, she noticed that many parents did not volunteer. She describes her journey of parental involvement in the school setting:

I said to myself “why not me?” Then I thought let’s see what happens. I started to notice when I participated that the teachers were very happy that I always participated. I started telling other Latina moms to come and help me serve food. The parents told me, “I don’t speak the language,” and I said, “I neither but to serve food we do not need to speak just move our hands and tell the kids where their food is that is all we need to do.” I started speaking to other Latina moms and we started going in a group. The director started asking for volunteers in the classroom because many have to use the restroom and we don’t want to leave them in the classroom. I had the time. I had one hour or half hour. I would tell other mothers to volunteer when we would leave our kids at school in the morning.

She believes parental involvement means to seek opportunities to help her in areas where she has limitations, such as limited English proficiency in order to help her daughters with their school work. She says she is goal oriented. “My goals have been extended to my children.”

Mrs. Carlota has expectations for her daughters’ future. Her sense of responsibility leads her to do whatever she can to help them achieve, as she commented:

I’ll tell you the truth. When I started Headstart I did not speak any English but I know with the kids I have to do it little by little because I have to help my kids

with their homework. Then the teacher told me in English that if I sit and listen to what I'm teaching the kids you will learn at the same time and also you can help me. That is what I did. I was an extra student and I started learning little by little. I never felt bad with people who speak another language. I always try to find out one way or another about what is going on. Yes, I think parents are timid because of the language more than anything or we will finally find a person between friends that we meet at school that speak both languages and then we find out through that person what is going on in the school.

In these examples, Mrs. Carlota has access to social capital and knowledge through various avenues: her flexible schedule, her willingness to be a leader and bring parents together, the school system providing an opportunity for parents to volunteer, and the goals and high expectations she set for herself. Together, these attributes enable her to tap into educational resources and opportunities that are important builders of social capital.

Mrs. Rio also communicates with other parents. Her engagement with them influences her perceptions of the school. She explains:

I do talk to the girls (other moms) that are more open. We talk about how they treat the kids here. When we talk I realize that this is a good school for my son. I think the other parents feel that way as well based on what they tell me. They always give me good comments.

Parents influence each other's opinions. They view one another as sources for learning. These parents build social capital, resulting in joint core beliefs.

The teachers at Dason create access to opportunities for Latino families. Mrs.



Rio's son does not miss out on school events when there is no transportation. This is made possible through the social networks she has with her son's teachers. This resource enables the desired outcome for her son's benefit. Mrs. Rio identifies a variety of contexts involving the actions of school officials:

The teacher is great; if I cannot make it she comes and picks up the kid if there is an activity. She helps me with transportation. That is why I think she is a great person. Anything that I need teachers call and then we meet. If my child had a problem with fighting I would come and talk to the administrator.

These examples demonstrate how parents communicate with teachers and network with each other. These relationships generate meaningful interactions and an increase in parents obtaining access to social capital and positive experiences of it. They also suggest that the actions of teachers are important to help parents activate and develop their social capital.

Some Latino parents lack certain aspects of social capital due to some limitations. Their absence deprives them of the social capital they need to form networks and obtain resources. Parents with long work schedules, for example, may be less involved in the school building because they are always at work whenever the school holds an event, and as a result are unable to meet other parents or network with school officials.

The following are examples of parents who are challenged to attend school events: It is difficult for Mrs. Maraca to participate in school events. She admitted that her overloaded work schedule usually limits the length of time she is able to stay at school events. She goes to the events but does not stay long enough to interact with other

parents or school officials. Mrs. Rio's involvement in the school setting is also limited. She has to work to help her husband financially support their family. She babysits other Latino parents' children during the times that the school holds events. Mrs. Mercedes is not able to participate often because her work hours do not match the hours that the school holds events. She tries to come when there is an event in the evening. She also attends functions on her days off.

A factor suggesting limited access to social capital are parents' own beliefs and expectations concerning their role and the role of school officials regarding to communication. Mr. and Mrs. Rivera explained: "We do not feel the need to be part of creating the activity. If there is a problem, the school will always call me by telephone." These parents believe it is the responsibility of the school system to communicate with them. Their lack of initiative to communicate with and dependency on school officials limits their access to the social relationship aspect of social capital.

Many families do not have access to social capital facilitated by the school system because they are unable to visit the school. In addition, lack of transportation prevents some parents from obtaining social capital. The parents who were unable to get to the school had little physical contact with people in the school community. Mrs. Rosario finds it hard to go to school events because she does not have transportation and sometimes the weather is too cold to walk. She also baby-sits her landlord's children, which limits the times she can go out.

#### *Social Capital Identified from Observations*

I observed how Latino parents obtained social capital at Dason Elementary School. A major aspect observed was the school system providing parents access to social capital at two school events. Both events were announced in the school's newsletter (a copy of which I obtained). The newsletter was in both English and Spanish. I attended a Physical Fitness night and a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting. Both events started at seven p.m. and ended at eight p.m. It was evident that starting the events at seven p.m. was appropriate for many parents' schedules. At both the Physical Fitness night and the PTO meeting, parents were enjoying themselves and were interacting with staff, other parents, and their children when appropriate. The social interactions made possible for parents in these two events built social capital among them and with school staff.

Latino parents were able to experience the PTO meeting in their own language, Spanish, because there was an interpreter. Parents could ask questions and have their voices heard because they were able to communicate with school officials.

Latino parents also experienced networking. An example of staff and parents interacting was the icebreaker at the PTO meeting. During the icebreaker, parents were talking to each other and were able to quickly meet others that had things in common with them. I observed several other actions going on during the ice breaker. The assistant principal came in nine minutes after the start of the meeting. She also participated in the icebreaker. The vice president of the PTO walked around and checked as people were answering the questions. She also participated and met a partner matching her profile. She attempted to interact with a parent in Spanish. I saw that all parents were smiling as

they interacted with each other. There were three men (fathers) in the group. I saw Spanish and English speaking parents communicating with each other. There was one table where children were playing games. The parents were spread out. Parents kept coming in throughout the night and participating. I overheard a parent encouraging another parent to come to the next event. The vice president said the goal of these icebreakers was to encourage parents to talk to each other.

This is an example of school officials trying to create access to social capital by encouraging parents to network with each other. As she (the PTO vice president) went over the names of parents that had something in common with her I noticed that all parents were still smiling. She continued to tell the parents to talk to one another. She also said, “we are one, we all have things in common.” She then explained the process and format of the meeting. As a result, a parent ended up asking a question after a previous parent encouraged her. Another parent raised his hand and asked what the meaning of PTO was. The translator explained what it meant. The vice president then told the parents that if they had questions they should ask.

I overheard some parents talking about helping each other out for the multicultural day event. The parents sitting on the other side were encouraging one another about coming to the next event. I also overheard one parent tell another not to be ashamed or afraid, speak up, and ask questions. I also saw Spanish speaking parents and English speaking parents communicating with each other through body language by hugging each other.

I noticed that all parents were interacting. I asked three Latino parents if they did

these types of activities in their country and they said no. They said the way the PTO conducts itself by involving parents, was different in their country, El Salvador, because they were not expected to give their opinions or collaborate in decision making for school events.

*Summary of social capital from observations.* None of the parents seemed to experience isolation in any of the two events. These meetings were important. They provided structural accommodations that could help parents gain access to beneficial information. They also provided valuable resources because of the social networks made.

#### *Cultural Capital Identified from Interviews*

School officials at Dason Elementary value and encourage the cultural capital Latino families bring into the school by granting inclusiveness of the Latino culture. The school system recognizes the attempts parents make at exhibiting their cultural resources by implementing parental participation programs that allow the voices of Latino parents to be heard.

Mrs. Ayala feels her culture is appreciated. She states, “since we are from Mexico they celebrate Mexican holidays. Sometimes they have food and we dress up like our country.” This experience has caused her family to feel welcomed. She continues, “I do feel a part of the school. I have never felt isolated.”

Mrs. Maraca feels welcomed at Dason. She believes her culture is appreciated. She explains how she brings her culture into the school:

Sometimes I have to take food, or make pastries. Yes I feel welcomed at the

school because my culture is appreciated. When it is Spanish American month, each country and culture sends foods from their own country and I take food and explain about my culture. I feel very good. I like to participate in whatever I can do. I never feel isolated because I can communicate in my own language because I understand it better and I speak very little English, and if I don't understand I get confused and I don't know what they are telling me.

When this parent explains her culture, she is sharing her cultural knowledge with the school community. This facilitates an understanding of her cultural world amongst the school community. Here we see the school system allowing parents' life experiences and cultural capital to inform the schools' cultural world. Part of what counts as cultural capital in this example is the use of Spanish to communicate with parents. The benefit of having translators encourages parents to get involved and reflects respect for Latino cultural norms because Spanish is the primary language of communication in their communities.

Another example of parents bringing their cultural capital to the school building is Mrs. Rio's experiences. She explains her experiences and views:

Lately they are putting on the table artifacts from different countries. I think they represent my country. For example, they do parties from Mexican holidays and Indian holidays. There are lots of tables and we bring something from the country we are from. The few times that I do come, I always feel fine about this.

This example reveals parents bringing their cultural experience to the schools through artifacts. The school shapes the conditions that invite Latino cultural capital. By

supporting and facilitating artifacts, the school system helps parents to feel successful in the activities that they are involved with. Latino families know that educators are interested in meeting their needs and are respectful of their cultural differences.

Mrs. Carlota believes the school community is complete because of the connection it has with parents. The opportunity to share cultural knowledge encourages her to get involved and activate cultural capital. “I am so happy and I bring food or portraits or anything I can bring that shows that I am Latina. Other parents that are Anglo Americans and other races feel good because they learn my culture.” Mrs. Carlota feels that school officials strive to promote an atmosphere of equality. “They treat us all in general the same. I am Latina and I can bring some of my culture to the school.”

In this example we see a parent feeling good about enabling those who may not be aware of her culture to learn about it. This provides the school community access to cultural knowledge that they did not have. Latino parents want educators to learn more about their culture. As they enter the school space they encounter a welcoming environment. In response, they choose to activate the cultural capital that allows them to establish participatory roles that fit their expectations.

Parents are exposed to the cultural practice and knowledge valued by the school. Parents at Dason report ways they are required to acknowledging involvement with their children’s schooling at home. Parents are also expected to be responsible for at-home consequences that encourage their students to be successful in school. Mrs. Mercedes identified ways she gets involved:

I became familiar with the school system in the United States before he went to

kindergarten. Schooling is different here because parents have to be frequently involved with their children in case something happens I am encouraged by this and am comfortable with this difference.

Ongoing communication in this case, happens as parents are taught to assume responsibility for their children's education. During these exchanges with parents cultural capital is obtained because they are able to meet the standards and expectations valued by the school system.

Mrs. Mercedes encourages and demands that her son do his schoolwork, and when necessary she helps him with it. She will also get in touch with his teacher if there is something wrong. She offers continuous verbal support to her son. She identified key examples about her involvement with her son:

I tell him he is intelligent and that he needs to behave well in school with the teachers, no fighting or anything. I ask him after school "what did they give you for homework, let's work." The problem is I don't speak English very well. My English is not correct or good. The teacher has told us that he needs to read to me. I have also given him some ideas to make it easier. I have given him tutors outside of school. If I see something is wrong with his school work, for example in reading, I put him to read with tutors so that when he is here at school he will do well. I have someone who can help him with his subjects.

These are cultural norms she learned from her son's teacher. This form of cultural capital allows her to help her son in ways that will benefit him academically.

When educators reach out to Latino communities, each group's perceptions of the



other shape and influence how they relate to each other. Then, parents end up adapting the cultural capital that educators expect as they become acquainted with the belief and cultural practices of the school system. Parents then know how to assert their right and expectations to have the teacher, counselor, or the principal deal with them.

As in the case of Mrs. Mercedes, she describes her courage to enlist the assistance of the principal. Mrs. Mercedes feels her communication is good with school officials. When the school system made a decision that she disagreed with, she was comfortable talking to them about it. She describes her experiences:

When there was a problem last year, they called me. Based on my experience from last year, I did not agree with the decision that the principal made. I told him it was incorrect and I would talk to the superintendent, the highest person that parents can talk to because I did not like the situation that was going on. With that I think he changed his mind. I feel like they now pay more attention to my son. I am more satisfied this year because of the communication with school officials. We are allowed to come and visit the classroom and we can come and have lunch with our kids. The doors are more open to parents. It has not always been that way, but with the problem that I had, I feel like things have changed. If I do not know English they put a translator for me. I am encouraged to find out more about my son's progress when I can understand.

The acquisition of cultural capital gave Mrs. Mercedes the knowledge to know what to do if she was not pleased with a school decision. The principal in this case chose to provide the respect to ensure the fairness that Mrs. Mercedes demanded. The

relationship between school officials and parents are critical to helping parents successfully activate and develop cultural capital. This exchange affirms parents' comfort in seeking support for their children. Latino parents are drawn into a sustained connection with the school in order to invest their cultural capital and successfully reap the desired benefit for their children.

The cultural capital that Latino parents activate involves family commitment. They support their children's schooling in many ways. Mrs. Carlota values the relationship she has with her daughters. One of the ways she builds that relationship is by going on long walks. She does not want to burden her children with only school work. She says, "they need some distraction time so we walk. Since I know they like to walk that is when they begin to really talk to me about school." Her relationship with her children is what she values the most. She wants them to feel they can come to her as a friend: "I don't just want to be the mother."

Mrs. Rio activates cultural capital through her views and actions of parental involvement. She believes parents should constantly be engaged with their children. Mrs. Rio is motivated by the belief that parents need to spend time doing activities with their children and talking with them. She communicated passionately about this:

In the summertime we go out and play, I take them to the pool. We do talk. Every parent needs to talk to their kids about who they hang out with and what they are doing.

The form of cultural capital known to Latino parents have typically have not been organizationally based to expose their children to self-directed education. Instead, they

have had access to cultural capital through loyalty and duty to care for family members.

### *Cultural Capital Identified from Observations*

Every time I entered Dason Elementary there was evidence of the value placed on the cultural capital that Latino families brought to the school. As I walked through the hallways I saw different international artifacts and visuals. Many of the artifacts were from Latin American countries. The representation of these artifacts demonstrated that the Latino culture exists in the school setting. Many of the artifacts were obtained through the collaboration of parents who brought them from their homes.

I saw evidence of the school system facilitating access to cultural capital and how parents possessed it. The assistant principal told me they send notices in English and Spanish inviting parents to all events. The first event, Physical Fitness Night, was being sponsored by the physical education teacher. I saw a translator and all documents were translated. By doing so, the actions of the school system created space for Latino families to have access to cultural capital. Parents obtained the resources needed to participate in school events and became acquainted with the school culture giving them knowledge of how the school world works. During this activity, parents and school officials were engaged in a less structured school setting. The principal brought his two children. Both administrators participated. This is an example of school officials modeling the actions they were expecting from parents. The families were participating in relays together. Parents were cheering their kids. Some families were standing to the side as different individuals participated. Parents appeared to be having fun. I saw a lot of enthusiasm and

excitement as they cheered their students. After speaking to two families in Spanish, I learned that they understood the activity routine. It was the first time some of them ever attended such an event. They seemed comfortable enough to participate. The actions were demonstrations of cultural capital actively developed from their observations and actions during the event.

Babysitting was provided for parents with younger children. A teacher informed me that students from the high school worked as volunteers watching the younger children in order for the older children and their parents to participate. By the school providing childcare, parents were able to attend the event. The parents who attended the event engaged in the school's cultural practice because they were able to gain first-hand knowledge of how the event functioned by being present and by observing the activities that took place. I later verified the number of families participating. There were eighty-eight families present. The school officials kept records by using a sign-in and sign-out sheet (which I got to look at).

Dason Elementary encourages parents to participate and lead activities exhibiting their cultural resources. These opportunities allow parents to obtain, activate their cultural capital, and become insiders in the school community. During the Parent Teachers' Organization (PTO) meeting, the assistant principal of Dason explained, "multicultural day sends a message to the community that we are all from somewhere else but we are one. We want to send a message that the school is one and that everyone should feel united. There is going to be music, artifacts, and food." I overheard a parent speaking to a parent at another table saying, "there is already a table from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and

Peru. She said, “if you want to sign up now you can.” The PTO president said, “we have Caucasian, African-American, Hispanics, and other races to represent at this event.” I was able to talk to some parents about the artifacts they might bring in and several told me how happy they were because the school was making an effort to show that they appreciated their culture. Planning for such an event allowed those involved to share extensive cultural knowledge transmitted by their cultural capital.

Dason Elementary seeks parental input in many ways. For example, the PTO secretary began to discuss a parent survey. She said, “we want to know your views on volunteers, uniforms, and activities.” She then talked about movie night. She gave the parents two options on this activity. One option was to rent a movie theatre and the other option was to show a movie at the school. She took a brief poll by asking parents to raise their hands. One parent raised her hand and asked if they could compromise on where the movie would be held. A parent then said she preferred to do the movie night at the school because of her lack of transportation. At the end of the meeting the vice president said, “remember your new friends.” These parents’ engagement was supported and encouraged by school officials. These accounts show how the parents learn about the school’s cultural world and the school learns about the parents’ cultural world. The participation of these parents gives volume and power to their voices when they position themselves as partners in decision making. I interpreted their presence in the meeting and actions as demonstrations of cultural capital because they were able to share their views and experiences from their cultural and background knowledge.

To finalize this section, whenever I went to a school event, I observed one or both

school administrators interacting with parents. One parent told me that she really appreciates the vice principal and feels like she can trust her. This parent told me she comes to the events because the school administrators are so nice and she knows they care about her kids.

*Borders and Boundaries Intertwine with Social and Cultural Capital*

Boundaries exist when Latino families' social and cultural capital worlds are different from the views of the school system (Erickson, 1993). Borders are disempowering when they become institutional barriers limiting parents' access to social and cultural capital. Boundaries can be negotiated (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998).

The system at Dason elementary recognizes borders and negotiates boundaries with parents resulting in the sharing of social and cultural capital. By broadening access and inclusiveness to Latino families many borders have been transformed to boundaries.

In the case of families without transportation which is a border, school officials make home visits to provide them the same opportunities as those who do have transportation. In the case of Mrs. Rio's family, her son is able to participate in school activities because the teacher will provide transportation.

The family develops a relationship with the teacher and obtains social capital because they know they have a connection with school officials when they are in need of transportation. The border is transformed into a boundary by the actions of the teacher because there is no change in the families' status of transportation but all parties agree to

allow school officials to provide it.

Dason recognizes that many Latino families have not developed the proactive approach of contacting their children's teachers. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Rivera trust that school officials will make the best decisions for their students. They depend on the school system to communicate with them. Teachers extend the service of reaching out to parents ahead of time if they have any concerns. School officials value parental input seeking their views on implementing programs and activities, through sending home surveys. When school officials hear the voices of parents through a survey or in person, parents' views become a resource that when constructed are a transfer of parents' cultural capital because their cultural knowledge comes into play and are responded to. If there are no relationships between parents and teachers borders exist which could be harmful to students' academic progress and critical to helping parents successfully activate the cultural capital that leads to breaking the barriers of communication and negotiating boundaries between parents and teachers.

When school officials make time from their busy schedules to encourage parental involvement borders are negotiated and boundaries are formed because communication takes place. It is a boundary because school officials negotiate their time to achieve desired results. When this happens, the school system is informed about the needs of the families. Mrs. Carlota reports that she does have a voice concerning school programs. She is pleased that the school will send flyers asking parents if they agree or disagree with an activity before implementing it. Mrs. Mercedes shares how she experiences communication at Dason:

Sometimes they find out our opinions before starting an activity. They will ask if I think they should have a program and how can I help. I think they are more interested in the parents so that we can approach them. I see the teachers are now asking how I feel.

Communication influences parents' perceptions. When parents understand what is expected by teachers borders are changed into boundaries narrowing the gap between parent and teacher relationships.

There are several factors limiting the outcome that social capital can provide. For instance, The Riveras, and Mrs. Rosario do not feel the need to talk to other parents about school matters. Mrs. Herrera explains why she does not communicate with other parents:

I do not talk to other parents. In my country everyone knows everyone so there is more communication. Here we do not know anybody. When we go to conferences in my country, we talk because we are comfortable and know one another.

Some Latino parents do not have the social capital that provides networking opportunities with other parents and often do not seek after it while others do. Parents are more comfortable interacting when they know each other

When situations are purposely set up for parents to activate social capital they interact with each other and boundaries are negotiated because parents who in the past may have kept to themselves end up forming relationships with other parents and staff. I was able to observe this at both the PTO meeting and the Physical Fitness night at Dason because activities were set up where parents were getting to know each other and staff.



Everyone was interacting with-in a non-traditional atmosphere.

Latino parents often have to work when the schools hold events during the day and sometimes in the evening, this is a border because parents have to help their families survive economically. Dason has negotiated (with parents) the time they start activities converting this issue into a boundary. This action is a demonstration that the school system values the presence of parents in their school. Parents attend activities because they want to participate in school events. Some parents even change their work schedules in order to attend meetings concerning their students. Engaging in the school's cultural practices elicits positive responses from members of the events in turn, boundaries are negotiated and social benefits are gained, then social and cultural capital are developed.

In the case of the Riveras, who seldom can experience participation in their children's school due to their work schedule; they are welcomed and feel happy because they interact with staff members who assure them that their son is getting a good education. Mrs. Maraca's case is similar with factors influencing her experience with her daughter's school because it is difficult for her to participate. She admitted that her overloaded work schedule usually limits the length of time she is able to stay at school events. If she goes to an event she does not stay long due to her work schedule. What is interesting about these two cases is the border that alienates them from the school becomes a boundary. It is a boundary because they are negotiating their time to make sure their presence exist even if it is in a small way. As a result, they are still able to network with their children's teachers gaining access to social capital. In the case of Mrs. Mercedes, involvement is limited due to her work hours but she tries to attend events on

her days off and in the evenings. Her exposure to the school environment and culture has influenced her in such a way that she feels comfortable to voice her concerns with school officials. This awareness strengthened her cultural capital giving her the courage to voice her views when she disagreed with any decisions made by school officials. She has reaped desired results because she believes school officials listened to her concerns and have made decisions supporting what she considered to be in her son's best interest.

School officials at Dason Elementary seek to recognize the borders impacting the presence of Latino parents in the school. Many Latino families at Dason have younger children that do not attend the school. I observed that at their Physical Fitness Night event, there were activities going on in classrooms for younger children. As a result, parents were able to give their undivided attention to the event while the school provided child care for the younger children. The school system recognized that the lack of child care was a border impeding parents from attending events. Their use of social capital gave them the influence to seek high school volunteers to help with childcare. This effort took careful planning resulting in a boundary because when negotiated, the high school students received credit for their volunteer hours while parents were able to enjoy the event.

The borders affecting parental involvement at home become boundaries when parents themselves grasp resources and or the school system finds ways of guiding parents as they help their children academically. Many parents have been intimidated concerning helping their children with homework due to their own language barriers and insecure ideas about school tasks.

Mrs. Rosario handles her challenges by depending on her older children to monitor the schoolwork of the younger siblings. Often times, Mrs. Ayala is not able to understand school requirements. When this happens she will contact the teacher or depend on her older daughter to explain the information. Mrs. Rio's engagement in her daughter's schooling is marked by several challenges. The extent to which she gets involved in her daughter's academic affairs has limitations. She lacks an understanding of the school's programs and does not have the necessary command of the English language to talk about them. She tries to follow through with the suggestions made by school officials like checking her children's book bags daily. In the case of Mrs. Mercedes, she believes she is limited to help her son academically due to her restricted English proficiency. She deals with this issue by staying connected with his teachers and providing a tutor for him. She believes that waking her son up in the morning, making him breakfast and getting him ready for school is significant in helping him succeed academically. Her availability to do this is the cultural capital she has that works for her family. Mrs. Carlota is challenged to comply with helping her daughter with certain types of assignments due to her lack of English proficiency. The issue is a boundary because she negotiates several options. She depends on her oldest daughter to help her. If that does not work she emails the teacher or calls a friend.

In each of these five examples, we find parents dealing with boundaries to help their children. In each incident, parents demonstrate processes and dynamics involving the negotiation of the boundaries they encounter. In these cases parents were flexible negotiating several options and were able to help their students complete their school

work. Their accesses to cultural resources such as the knowledge to find answers were available through social capital obtained from their social networks (their older children, their child's teacher, or another person).

These findings echo the voices of Latino parents as they share their experiences at Dason elementary. In the process, parents construct social and cultural capital because of the resources and opportunities made available to them. The opportunities to gain access to capital are often influenced by the school system. Parents use many survival strategies to deal with the borders in their lives. They also accept negotiated boundaries facilitated by school officials creating opportunities for their families. Creative strategies were necessary to address borders related to parent work schedules, child care, transportation, and language barriers.

Latino parents will participate in school events, depending on the efforts that the school system makes to connect with them. Whether parents attend school events, volunteer, talk with the teacher, or check homework daily, they are involved in their children's education.

Dason school officials understand parental involvement by acknowledging parents' life experiences and cultural capital to inform the school's cultural worlds. Particular forms of social capital identify productive relationships that influence their knowledge. The partnerships with parents are productive whether the presence of parents is in the school building or at their home.

*Main themes in parents' thinking.* Parents feel welcomed at Dason Elementary. This belief is based on how they are treated by teachers and other school officials. They

also feel welcomed based on how their children are treated. Latino parents agree with how Dason deals with their children. They appreciate the level of concern that school officials extend to them. They believe that their children are getting a good education. In addition, they trust school officials because they experience the incentives and actions by the school to address barriers. The more teachers were involved with parents the more positive the parents' attitudes were towards them.

Parents feel empowered when they are able to communicate in Spanish. They appreciate the effort the school makes to translate documents sent home. Information in Spanish provides a means for parents to make informed decisions concerning parental involvement at home and at school. Because they are able to understand what the school's expectations are, they like controlling the academic environment at home. For example, those that are challenged to help their children with homework, have the knowledge to know what to do about it. Others have the benefit of being involved at school. When parents can understand what the school events are, they are more willing to attend and support the event. When this happens, they believe they are powerful contributors to the school culture.

Involving parents in the education of their children has contributed to parents understanding roles in their children's education. Knowing their role is not necessarily something they learned in their countries. They are able to adjust to the expectations of the American school system. As a result of this knowledge, parents are able to encourage a positive learning environment at home with their children. When parents have these experiences they believe they are the primary educational resource for their children.

Parents appreciate it when their opinions are sought after and valued. They will provide feedback about activities. They do not believe that speaking Spanish should stop them from sharing their ideas. Latino parents are willing to go beyond their language barriers to participate in their children's school. They believe they need basic information regarding school programs if they are to be effective supporters.

These families want Americans to understand their culture. They enjoy bringing their culture into the school building. They know that the school recognizes their diversity. They believe that others can learn from them.

Parents who are willing to network encourage confidence with each other. They are willing to help each other adapt and understand the school system. They listen to each other and learn from one another.

Parents believe they have an accurate perception of school officials. They have hands-on experiences with teachers and administrators because they all participate in many events together. They realize that they are able to communicate with school officials beyond structured meetings and without always needing translators. These activities elicit a comfort level for parents beyond their dealings with Spanish speaking staff. Parents say they are impressed and encouraged to participate when they see school officials making time to get close to them.

In summary, it is critical for schools to understand the effects of cultural capital, social capital, borders and boundaries and their influence on parental involvement. Dason Elementary plays a critical role in eliciting parental involvement. Parents are willing to abide by school policy in order to help their children. This finding is different than what

was found in the literature. The actions of school officials at Dason seem to be an exception but not necessarily the rule in dealing with Latino families.

Despite the founded outcomes, Latino parents admit that they depend on the school system to lead them towards the level of involvement necessary to achieve desired outcomes for their family. The findings suggest that there are variations concerning Latino parental involvement.

The next and final chapter discusses implications supporting previous research. It also encourages researchers, policy makers, and school leaders to respond and react to this study. It compels them to take the necessary actions in their respective fields concerning Latino parental involvement.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to seek and explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the Pell Public Schools (PPS). Attention was given to parents' views of what encouraged their involvement in school-related activities. This research brought out the voices of Latino parents.

This descriptive case study was focused on the perceptions and experiences of Latino parents whose students attend Dason Elementary School. This study employed the methods of interviewing, observations, and descriptions of the conceptual framework. In fact, the term *parental involvement* was examined, giving particular meaning to parental involvement in school and parental involvement at home.

### Conclusions and Implications for Research Question 1

What are Latino parents' experiences with Dason Elementary? Parents' views and practices were influenced by how they felt about their treatment by the school system. Teachers and administrators constantly found ways to create a welcoming environment for parents; as a result, they liked attending school activities. When parents attended activities they were encouraged to ask questions and offer suggestions, when appropriate. Although this was not a familiar experience (for some) from what they knew from their



native country, they certainly believe that school officials are the authority and should be trusted. Their perceptions and experiences helped build trust towards school officials. In the same way, trust is important to Latino parents. They believe that school officials know what is best for their children. This is in line with the research by Lopez, Mahitivanichcha, (2001); and Peña, (2000) because they found that Latino parents believe educators are experts and trust that school officials are making the best academic decisions for their children and they come with these beliefs from their native countries.

A factor resulting in positive outcomes is the way Dason communicates with parents. Parents' level of involvement is directly linked to structured activities including Spanish speaking staff shaping the conditions that invite open communication between Latino families and the school system.

Latino parents want to be involved when they feel included in their children's education. An important inclusion factor at Dason is that they can communicate with their students' teachers. Everything is translated into Spanish. At Dason, parents are able to communicate with school officials in their own language through staff that work as translators. This opportunity allows them to gain knowledge and information to help their children at home by being aware of school work, and system procedures. This is consistent with the research by Delgado-Gaitan, (2001) who found that communication with parents in Spanish needs to be frequent, verbal and written. When Latino parents know what to do then they want to be involved.

An aspect empowering parents is that they know what is going on in their children's school and how to find out. An example, of this is they realize that they can be

advocates for their children and have the right to challenge and question decisions that affect their children. This is a new found reality for many because in their country of origin, it was unheard of to question school authority.

Participants said they prefer that their experience concerning contact with school officials be that the school system initiates contact with them if there is ever a concern about their children. Overall, Latino parents expect school personnel to make the first move in regards to communication. This study reinforces the work of Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba, (2001) who concluded that parents assume that they should not contact school personnel unless the school personnel contacted them first. Another consideration for further research is to study how this method of communication affects Latino students whose parents depend on teachers to contact them first. School leaders may want to analyze this cultural norm and develop a system that continues to communicate well with these families while respecting their cultural beliefs.

Further research may consider the effects of communication between educators and parents. This should consist of more than translating information into Spanish. Aronson, (1996) and Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba, (1995) found in their conclusions that communication can be a challenge between teachers and parents because parents do not understand the meaning of educational terms. It is common knowledge that even parents who speak English can feel at a loss about educational jargon, when communicating with school officials. Studying the effects of communication and how parents understand their interactions with school officials needs to be examined further in order to find out what parents really believe and understand.

This study suggests that parents are partners with school officials. For example, when parents know what is expected of them they take on the task at home by following through with school policy such as signing their children's assignment books. This expectation from the school system guides and encourages parental involvement at home.

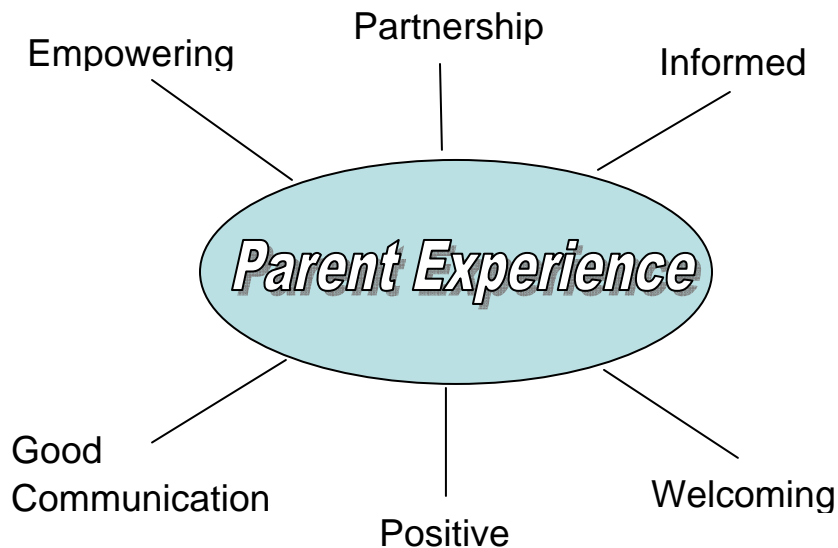
The conversation with eight Latino families provides enlightenment about their experiences at Dason. Despite cultural or language barriers, parents were willing to support their children in the best way they knew how. This research shows that some Latino parents do participate at the level of involvement expected by school officials. Future research should study how Latino parental involvement affects the academic achievement of Latino students when parents apply the methods expected of them by the school system.

This study reinforces what Sheldon (2002) and Peña (2000) found concerning the level of parental involvement and parents' feelings about being comfortable with their children's school environment. The parents at Dason strive to attend activities. They feel welcomed at the school because all meetings and materials are translated into Spanish. This adds to their level of comfort. Connecting with parents in this way provides them with the experience of being included. An example of how the meetings were conducted is, parents were able to ask questions and were included in planning school wide activities. Moreover, Dason parents perceived that school personnel had positive attitudes and they felt encouraged to be involved both at home and at school. School officials may want to use this information as they plan ways to include Latino parents in the life of the school.

Transportation continues to be a factor in many social aspects for Latino families. Many Dason parents can walk to school events because they live a very short distance from the school. This shows us that where parents live can be significant in their level of participation. Most of the research done on Latino families and transportation reported that parents could not attend school events because they did not have a means of transportation. Further research should be done on other Pell County schools where parents do not live in the neighborhood of the school in order to obtain more conclusions on the impact of transportation and the physical involvement and experiences of Latino parents in schools.

When parents believe that the school system values their culture they see themselves as members and partners in the school community. Also, it was found that partnership depends on what teachers and parents do. Dason treats parents with respect while learning their values and culture. In turn, parents continue to feel supported while showing effort, motivation, and growing confidence each day about the school environment.

Latino parents feel welcomed when they can share their culture with the school community. This results in Latino experiences and culture informing the cultural world of schools because the school is able to learn something about Latino culture. This is consistent with the conclusions of Delgado-Gaitan (2004) and Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) because they found that parents know their contributions are valued when school officials recognize their cultural strengths and are respectful of their language and cultural differences.



*Figure 5.* This figure highlights parent experiences.

Latino parental involvement is impacted by their experiences. This figure explains the main implications found in the research. The words surrounding the oval circle are connected by lines showing their influence on parent experiences. It fits with the research because together they make a difference encouraging Latino parental involvement.

### Conclusions and Implications for Research Question 2

What do various Latino parents in Dason Elementary understand parental involvement to be?

This research is a testament about how low-income, immigrant populations view education. It suggests that Latino parents do care about their children’s school achievement. Though not a common pattern, some parents found their way through

complex issues on behalf of their children regardless of obstacles (such as language barriers) when presented with a conflict. They believe that they can make a difference in their children's education. Consistent with Delgado-Gaitan's (2001) findings parents see themselves as critical, active agents and advocates in their children's education, both at home and in the school setting. Educators must consider that Latino parents do not necessarily know what is necessary for them to do as informed advocates over the long term of their children's schooling career. Further investigation could seek to discover how effective parental advocacy is for Latino children once their parents are familiar with the school system.

This study found that Latino parents believe supporting the well being of their children is the most important meaning of parental involvement because it is beneficial and is the most important factor in their children's lives. Latino families believe commitment and loyalty to family is their duty.

This is in line with the research that Reyes, Scribner, and Scribner (1999) report on characteristics of most importance to the Latino culture such as: family, commitment, loyalty, and care for family members. Latino parents conceptualize involvement as a means of supporting the total well-being of their children. This is often not obvious when reported in research. Many of the actions of Latino parents may not occur within the school walls. Parental involvement is often reported in research and viewed by educators as the physical, active presence of parents in the school building--for example, including parents as volunteers. Inger (1992) emphasized this same conclusion; when Latino parents stay away from their children's school, or are non-confrontational and reserved,

teachers misread these behaviors as uncaring and uninvolved in their children's education.

School officials need to look at the big picture and redirect these kinds of stereotypes. They need to find ways to reach out to Latino families and learn their perspectives about parental involvement. The school system can find methods that are non-threatening, while at the same time investing to understand and learn who Latino families are and what motivates their actions in the school system.

This study suggests that parents' level of confidence affects their involvement. The parents in this study often felt greatly insecure because they were unable to communicate in English. Many believe they could not help their children confront academic challenges. Parents know their language barrier hinders the level of help they can provide for their children academically. Some of them depended on their older children to assist the younger ones with their school work. Others were bold to accept the help that teachers could provide. Pell County school system could consider working with parents to arrive at a local means of obtaining immediate resources to address inept beliefs and perceptions that can hold some families back from getting involved.

Policy makers must be aware and understand the realities of Latino families as they relate to English as a second language. They need to find ways to elicit active partnerships that support schools and parents. They should address ways of helping students academically whose parents do not have enough language to help their own children and allow flexibility for individual schools to execute the function that best serves their populations.

Some Dason families depend on the help they obtain from other parents to guide them through policy and school processes. Various Latino parents support each other with information when conditions are set up for relationships to be formed. This has been beneficial for these families. This supports the perspectives of Lee and Bowen (2006), because they found that when parents interacted while volunteering at the school or attending meetings together, they gained access to beneficial information when they collaborated with each other.

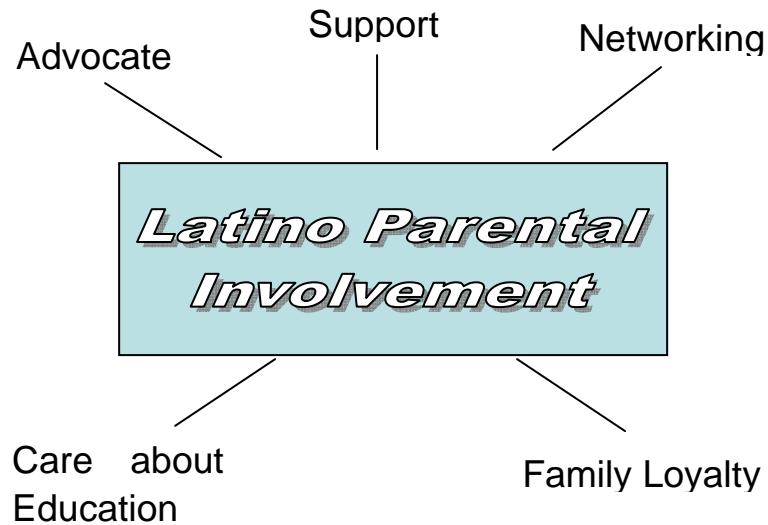
There were participants in this study who did not embrace networking with other parents. Some believed it was more comfortable to meet parents from their home countries because they all shared the same social norms. It takes invitations and purposeful conditions for Latino parents to build relationships with school officials and other parents.

Latino parents at Dason see their role as seekers of opportunities to help them with their limitations in order to manage the needs of their children. For instance, some in this study spend time learning about the school system's policies, networking with school officials, or seeking answers to assist their children.

Despite recent research, the term *parental involvement* does not have the same meaning to these parents. This supports the findings of Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) reporting that parental involvement is an ever changing practice that varies depending on the context in which it occurs. Further research should consider exploring the differences and similarities with the term from the Latino perspective, perhaps there will be a bridge in what educational mainstream research has meant concerning the term



and how Latino parents define it.



*Figure 6.* This figure is about parental involvement.

Latino parental involvement is explained through this figure. The words around the box illustrate how Latino parents view parental involvement. These are the lenses provided by the eight families in this study.

### Conclusions and Implications for Research Question 3

How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement?

Dason has made it clear that working with the Latino community is possible. It is evident that Dason's school officials are engaged with their Latino communities. They have made specific decisions consistent with Aronson's (1996) findings by scheduling evening events when most parents are not working. They seek help for Latino families in areas

where they have barriers such as transportation and childcare. This is consistent with the conclusions of Quezada, Diaz, and Sanchez (2003) who studied parents who could not attend meetings because of lack of transportation and childcare.

Latino parents in this study appreciated that their opinions were heard and that school officials consulted them before making some decisions. This study suggests that school officials' decisions have helped shape the perceptions of Latino parents about the school system. They felt that the school system valued their beliefs and opinions. It seemed awkward at first, for some parents, to voice their views but they quickly adapted to joining the institution's requests and expectations. School leaders need to understand that Latino parents want to be taken seriously and that they have something to offer concerning the implementation of programs, activities, or events that impact the well being of their children.

The participants' level of appreciation was associated with how the school leaders (assistant principal and principal) carried themselves during school events. They liked it when they saw school officials participating in the same functions of which they were a part and engaging in similar activities. The study shows that the actions of school officials help bring another perspective to parents concerning their school officials. In their countries they do not question school officials because they are seen as omnipotent and untouchable. The evidence supports Epstein's (1986) conclusion, involving unstructured actions outside of the school environment. This strengthened the relationships that parents and school officials have. These Latino parents see their children's administrators as approachable and friendly. This is consistent with the

research of Delgado-Gaitan (2001) warning the school systems about the need to include Latino parents and making them partners with the school community. In addition, it also supports the conclusions of Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) echoing how important it is for school officials to have a relationship with Latino families and to be informed of the cultural worlds of the families they serve.

Dason school officials have intentionally identified strategies that engage parents in their children's education. They have found ways to break down barriers that traditionally keep Latino families away and reserved from the school.

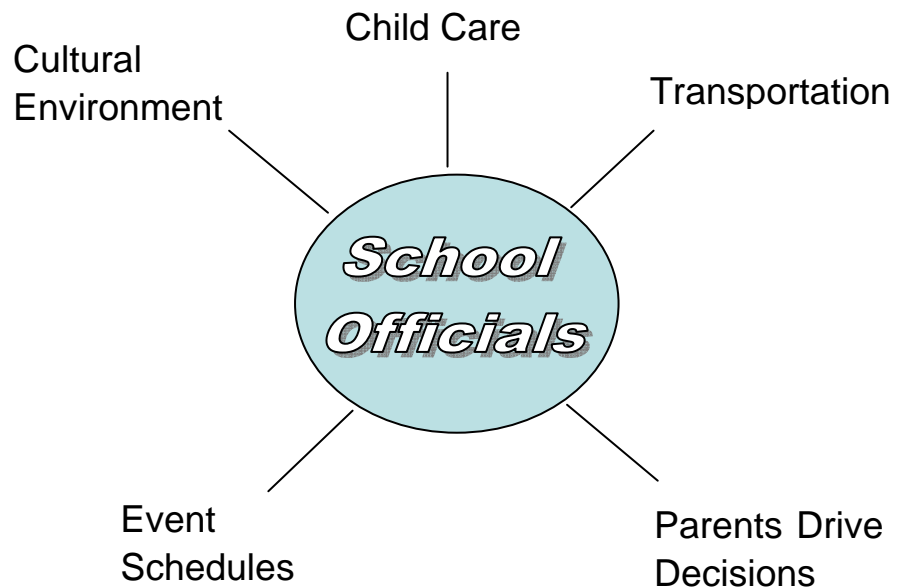
This study suggests that school leaders need to create environments that allow the lives of Latino families to inform the school's world. Dason shows this when they allow for the presence of artifacts and sponsored cultural activities. School leaders at Dason invest in the needs of the families they serve. This has greatly influenced the perceptions of parents causing them to want to get out of their comfort zone and take the chance at being involved in their children's school regardless of their cultural background.

Dason has also chosen to assist parents in understanding their role and the school system's role. Together, they are transforming practices and policies impacting students. An important conclusion in this research was, in order to educate and meet the needs of Latino children, it is critical to educate the parents by guiding them with ways that they can understand and function in an American school system. Researchers may consider studying the perceptions of Latino parents in middle school or high school. Parents sometimes view their roles differently when their children are older and capable of making certain decisions for themselves.

School leaders and policy makers need to realize that involving Latino parents is an ongoing and important process. They should consider investing in ways to help Latino parents gain confidence about participating in schools.

This research demonstrates that most of the communication with parents was done through translators. Further studies should investigate the effects of training non-Spanish speaking staff and ways they can be engaged with parents in the absence of translators. Educators are the experts who should have the knowledge of reaching out to the communities they serve.

Parents in this study reported that their experiences were less inviting at other schools their children attended. Policy and practice suggests the need for professional development throughout educational systems in the area of Latino parental involvement in order to send the message to other school systems. Although there has been a low volume of investigations about Latino parental involvement, it is a critical factor in student success and warrants research beyond this specific study.



*Figure 7.* This figure is about school leaders.

This figure describes what school leaders at Dason Elementary do to accommodate Latino families. School officials are in the center of each action because they are the central elements making decisions that influence Latino parental involvement.

### Summary and Recommendations

In summary, Dason elementary is changing the lives of Latino families. It is an exemplar to all schools in the area of Latino parental involvement. As a result of the actions of this school system, Latino parents are involved at a level that is affecting their children and school officials in an unprecedented way. While no single model for parental involvement is being recommended, Dason has proven to have some

fundamental premises that are effective.

The results of this study could be emulated beyond the scope of Dason Elementary. The school system and the parents must have power. When this happens both parties can collaborate for the benefit of students. When collaborative relationships are built power is created on both sides (school system and parents).

School systems need to be committed to reaching out to Latino families. This might mean the way they budget for events and how they schedule the time for parents to participate in school activities. School leaders need to reach out differently to Latino families by doing whatever it takes to make them partners. When this happens opportunities are maximized and parents have access to them.

Home-school communication is essential in order for parents to be effective in their role in school and at home. It must be non-threatening and open for parents to see themselves as agents of communication with school officials.

Opportunities must be created for parents to establish an academic routine at home. Parents need guidance and support from school officials in order to understand what is expected of them. It is inherent that when this level of communication takes place all correspondences are in the language that parents can understand. When this happens parents feel included in their children's education.

Another item that school systems must consider is the presence of the Latino culture in the school building. Latino families are welcomed when they know their culture is being represented in their children's school. Parents should also be allowed to lead the way on what their culture means and what it physically looks like in the school

building.

The findings of this study can be applied in other contexts. This research has captured strategies and processes that worked for eight Latino families and the school culture of Dason Elementary. Schools systems can design programs that fit their needs while keeping their attention on what a racially changing elementary school (Dason) in Pell County has done in the area of parental involvement.

This study is a good beginning for further dialog and research of all schools especially racially changing schools. This unique study implies that both policy makers and practitioners must think and act differently if they want to make a difference with Latino families.

## APPENDIX A

### *LATINO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT*

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in Pell Public Schools. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer a set of questions during a tape recorded interview lasting at least one hour.

#### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in the literature on parental involvement. In addition, the benefits to the education research community will be to further the body of applied theory of social interaction that occurs between Latino families and educational systems.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. I will be the only person who will have access to your true identity. The audio tapes will be stored in a locked facility then destroyed by me when the research is complete. To maintain anonymity during the interview your names and other identifiers will not be placed on any documents or other research data.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no Penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

#### **CONTACT**



This research is being conducted by Lukisha Barrera Gibbs at George Mason University. She may be reached at 703 622-5213 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact her faculty advisor, Dr. David Brazer, Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University at 703 993-3634. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Signature:

## **PARTICIPACION DE PADRES LATINOS**

### **FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO**

#### **PROCEDIMIENTO DE INVESTIGACION**

El propósito de esta investigación es para explorar las razones por que hay padres Latinos que pueden estar participando o no en una escuela primaria que esta cambiando racialmente dentro del Sistema de Escuelas Publicas Pell. Si aceptas participar, seras sujeto a una serie de preguntas durante una entrevista grabada que podra tener un tiempo de duracion de por lo menos una hora.

#### **RIESGOS**

No se preve ningun riesgo para los participantes en esta investigación.

#### **BENEFICIOS**

No habra ningun beneficio personal directo para Usted como participante. Los beneficios para la comunidad de investigacion educative seran para promover el cuerpo de teoria aplicada de interacción social que ocurre entre la familia Latina y los sistemas educativos.

#### **CONFIDENCIALIDAD**

Los datos de este estudio seran confidenciales. Yo sere la única persona que tendra acceso a tu verdadera identidad. Las cintas de audio seran guardados bajo llave en un lugar seguro, y tan pronto sea concluido el estudio, seran destruidos por mi persona. Para mantener el anonimato durante la entrevista, sus nombres y otros detalles de identidad no seran incluidos en ningun documento u otros datos del estudio,

#### **PARTICIPACION**

Su participación es voluntaria, y te podras retirar del estudio en cualquier momento y por culaquier motivo. Si decides no participar, o si se retira del estudio, no habra

Peñalización

ni pérdida de beneficios correspondientes. No habrán costos a su persona, ni tampoco a otras personas.

## **CONTACTO**

Este estudio esta bajo la dirección de la Sra. Lukisha Barrera Gibbs en la Universidad de George Mason, y ella podra ser localizada al telefono 703-622-5213 para preguntas o para informar sobre algun problema relacionado al estudio. Usted se podra comunicar con el asesor de la facultad, Dr. David Brazer, Profesor Asociado de la Escuela de Educación y Desarrollo Humano de la Universidad de George Mason al 703-993-3634. Por ultimo, se podrá comunicar con la Oficina de Protección de Temas de Investigaciones de la Universidad de George Mason al 703-993-4121, si tienes alguna pregunta sobre sus derechos como participante en el estudio.

Esta investigación ha sido revisada de acuerdo a los procedimientos que gobiernan su participacion en esta investigación.

## **CONSENTIMIENTO**

He leído este formulario, y consiento a participar en este estudio.

---

Nombre

---

Fecha

**Latino Parental Involvement**

**Lukisha Barrera Gibbs, George Mason University 703 622-5213**

My name is Lukisha Barrera Gibbs, a Ph.D. student in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. I am currently working on my Dissertation Research, under the direction of Dr. David Brazer, Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. **The Research Purpose is:** This study seeks to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the Pell Public Schools (PPS). **My specific research questions are:** What are Latino parents' experiences in PPS? What do various Latino parents in PPS understand parental involvement to be? How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement? All school districts, schools, and individual participants will be disguised through the use of pseudonyms in all published material. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. This project has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Boards of George Mason University. Should you have any question at any time you may contact either me or Dr. Brazer at 703 993-3634.

If you are willing to have your school district participate in this research on parental involvement, please complete this form and return it to:

Lukisha Barrera Gibbs, Doctoral Student  
15051 Cardin Place  
Woodbridge, VA 22193

Thank you in advance for your help.

School district name:

\_\_\_\_\_

Responsible official (please print): \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Official signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B:

### Interview General Guide (English Version)

#### Latino Parental Involvement

Lukisha Barrera Gibbs

(703) 622-5213

#### Research Purpose:

This study seeks to explore the reasons why Latino parents may or may not be involved in one racially changing elementary school in the Pell Public Schools (PPS).

#### RQ1: What are Latino parents' experiences in PPS?

##### I. Interview Questions:

Do you participate in activities at your child's school? Why?/ Why not?

Do you feel welcomed at your child's school? Explain

Do you feel your culture is valued or appreciated by your child's school? (How do you know?/ What experiences have you had in this regard?

Do you ever experience isolation as it relates to getting involved in your child's school? Why?/ Why not?

Do you communicate with other parents from your child's school concerning school related matters? Explain (If not: Do you communicate with anyone concerning school related matters?)

What kinds of changes have you made to adapt to the school's culture?

#### RQ2: What do various Latino parents in PPS understand parental involvement to be?

##### II. Interview Questions

Describe your role in your child's education?

What kinds of activities do you do with your child that could impact his/ her education

If your child was having trouble in school or you had some concerns; Do you contact your child's teacher or does the teacher usually contact you? Explain

**RQ3: How do choices school officials make affect Latino parental involvement?**

III. Interview Questions

Do you think your child's school (teachers, counselors, or administrators) communicate effectively with you? Explain

If a school official made a decision that you did not agree with, how would you handle it?

Do you believe you have an input with the implementation of parental participation programs?

What have school officials done to try to reach out to you?

## Guía General de Entrevista (Version en Español)

### Latino Parental Involvement

Lukisha Barrera Gibbs

Tel. (703) 622-8468

### El Propósito de la Investigación

Este estudio tiene como propósito, explorar las razones porque padres Latinos pueden estar participando o no en una escuela primaria que esta racialmente cambiando dentro del sistema de Escuelas Publicas Pell (EPP)

### RP1: Cuales son las experiencias de padres Latinos en EPP?

#### 1. Preguntas de Entrevista:

Participas en actividades en la escuela donde su hijo(a) asiste? Porqué?/ Porque no?

Te sientes bienvenido en la escuela donde su hijo(a) asiste? Explique.

Sientes que su cultura es valorado y apreciado por la escuela donde su hijo(a) asiste? (Como sabes?/ Que experiencias haz tenido en este sentido?)

Has experimentado aislamiento en lo relacionado a su participacion en la escuela de su hijo(o)? Porqué? / Porqué no?

Te comunicas con otros padres de la escuela de su hijo(a) en lo concerniente a materias relacionados a la escuela? Explique ( Si no, Te comunicas con alguien en lo concerniente a materias relacionados con la escuela?)

Que tipos de cambios haz tenido que hacer para adaptarse a la cultura de la escuela?

### RP2: Que entienden algunos padres Latinos en EPP sobre lo que significa la participación de padres.

#### 2. Preguntas de Entrevista

Describe su papel en la educación de su hijo(a).

Que clases de actividades haces con su hijo(a) que pueden impactar en su educación?

Si su hijo(a) estuviera confrontando problemas en la escuela, o si tuvieras alguna preocupacion, te comunicarias con el(la) maestro(a), o la(el) maestro(a) se comunica con Usted? Explique.

**RP3: En que forma las decisiones tomadas por oficiales de la escuela afectan la participación de padres Latinos?**

3. Preguntas de Entrevista

Opinas que los maestros, consejeros y administradores de la escuela de su hijo se comunican efectivamente con Usted? Explique.

Si un oficial de la escuela toma una decision con la cual Usted no concuerda, como Usted procedería?

Cree Usted que tienes participación o voz con la implementación de programas de participación de padres?

Que han hecho los oficiales de la escuela para alcanzarte o lograr acercamiento a Usted?



APPENDIX C:

Observation General Guide  
Notes Section

Parent/            Date:  
Teacher           Time  
Conference       Begin:  
                         End:

Participant(s)  
PTA                Date:  
Meeting           Time  
                         Begin:  
                         End:

Participant(s)  
Special            Date:  
Event              Time  
                         Begin:  
Participant(s)    End:

Areas to pay close attention to:

1. Choices school officials make to involve parents.
2. Are both parents present or other family members?
3. Who do the parents sit next to and where?
4. How are parents approached before the meeting begins, during, and ends.
5. Is there a translator?
6. Are documents translated? Will meeting notes be translated/
7. Parent(s)' experience in the activity (are they smiling, what do they talk about, body language).

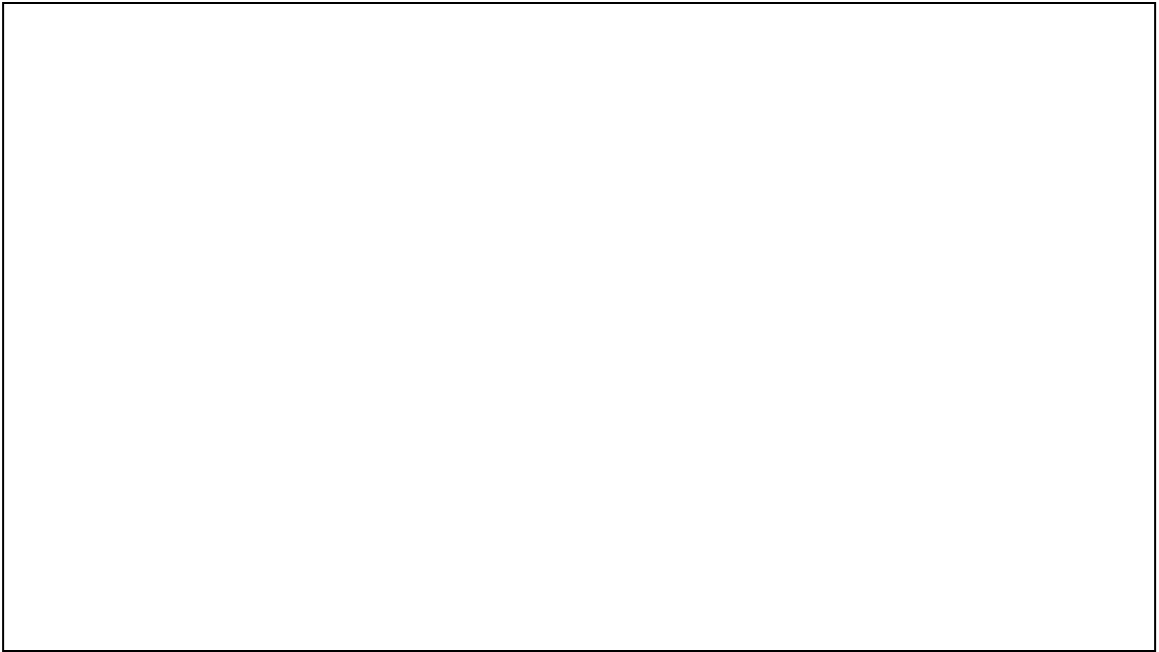
8. Is participation formal/ informal (are parents running the meeting, is their voice heard).
9. Is this the parent(s)' first time attending (do they seem to understand routines)?

My comments:

Feelings/reactions:

Working hypothesis:

## Diagram of the Setting



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## REFERENCES

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Lukisha Barrera Gibbs graduated from Balboa High School, Panamá City, Panamá, in 1991. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Pace University in 1995. She was employed as a teacher in Marion County, Florida, for two years and then received her Master of Science in Education from Pace University in 1999. She then taught in Fairfax County, VA for three years, Prince William County, VA for four years. In between her years of teaching she has served as an adjunct professor for Panamá Canal College and Strayer University. She has been an Assistant Principal, in Manassas City, VA for the past three years.