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Redefining Parental Involvement: Lessons From High-Performing Migrant-Impacted Schools

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Migrants are one of the most academically vulnerable groups in the United States, constantly faced with economic, health, and work-related problems that translate into lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates. These hardships make it difficult for schools to effectively negotiate the parental involvement terrain and promote academic success for this group. Because of the paucity of literature on effective parental involvement practices for migrants, we sought to fill this gap in the literature. Using a qualitative approach, interviews and observations were conducted in four effective migrant-impacted school districts throughout a 5-month period. Findings suggest these schools were successful at involving parents because they aimed to meet parental needs above all other involvement considerations. In other words, schools were successful not because they subscribed to a particular definition of involvement, but because they held themselves accountable to meet the multiple needs of migrant parents on a daily and ongoing basis.

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Migrant families are among the most severely marginalized groups in the country, constantly faced with economic, cultural, and social discrimination both within and outside the school environment (Wright, 1995). They are characterized in the literature as having high rates of social and physical isolation, numerous health- and work-related problems, and a host of other factors (e.g., limited English language skills, high mobility, etc.) that place enhanced demands on school organizations to effectively accommodate the multiple needs of this population (Chavkin, 1996; Guerra, 1979; Sosa, 1996).

Migrant workers have been described as “the poorest of the country’s poor” (Guerra, 1979), earning approximately \$5.00 an hour for 1000 hours of work, or \$5,000 annually. Although some scholars suggest migrants earn \$6,500 per year (Chavkin, 1991), or perhaps up to \$7,500 per year (Fact Sheet, 1995), one fact is evident: migrant workers are earning well below the poverty level set by the federal government. These financial hardships often force migrant children into the workforce to supplement the family income (Implementation of the Helsinki Accords, 1993). Unfortunately, because child labor laws are far less stringent for children who work in agriculture and its related industries, at least one-third of migrant children work in the fields under the same harsh conditions as their parents (1993).

Prewitt-Díaz and Trotter (1990) suggest the need for children to work often competes with educational demands, because working children may make a huge difference in family financial matters. In a work environment where children’s earning potential is as much as an adult, every working hand is essential to family survival. However, working in the field often exposes workers to toxic pesticides, which can lead to multiple health risks (Implementation of the Helsinki Accords, 1993). In fact, research findings suggest that migrants have higher rates of tuberculosis, pneumonia, asthma, emphysema, bronchitis, and intestinal parasites (Huang, 1993). Given these health risks—in conjunction with the poor working conditions associated with the mass-production agricultural industry—it is not surprising the average life expectancy of migrants is only 49 years of age (Education Commission of the States, cited in Tan, Ray, & Cate, 1991).

For obvious reasons, the hardships that surround the migrant lifestyle have a detrimental impact on the educational advancement of students. Research suggests high mobility, coupled with these hardships, results in lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and other school-related problems (Cranston-Gingras & Anderson, 1990; Guerra, 1979; Hinojosa & Miller, 1984; Manaster, Chan, & Safady, 1992; Prewitt-Díaz, Trotter, & Rivera, 1989, 1990; Schuler, 1990). Moreover, migrants have one of the highest dropout rates in the nation, and are less educated than the general workforce (Huang, 1993), having an average education of less than 8 years (Harrington, 1987). Given these hardships, it is easy to understand why school personnel would experience much stress as they attempt to work with migrant populations in their respective communities.

Policy analysts agree it is in the best interest of everyone to search for better ways to educate migrant children (García, 1996; Hayes-Bautista,

Schink, & Chapa, 1988; Latino Eligibility Task Force, 1993). One promising approach is through increased parental involvement in education. Research consistently shows a high correlation between parental involvement and the academic performance of children (Becher, 1986; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1986; Henderson, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burrow, 1995; Hobbs et al., 1984; Peterson, 1989; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). Moreover, research suggests parent participation often enhances student self-esteem, improves parent-child relationships, and helps parents develop positive attitudes toward schools (Brown, 1989). Research also suggests that educators benefit as a result of increased parental involvement: teachers gain confidence in their efficacy to teach children (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987), the curriculum is transformed as teachers build on community “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 1995; Moll, 1988, 1992), administrators strengthen community relations as they interact with parents on a more personal basis (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986), and schools become more collaborative and caring in nature when working with the community at large (Coleman, 1991; Comer, 1986; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986; Henry, 1996; Noddings, 1992).

In addition, the strong and positive association between parental involvement in schooling and students’ educational outcomes has been consistently documented in research studies (Becher, 1986; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Henderson, 1987; Peterson, 1989; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). Evidence indicates that parental involvement not only increases students’ academic achievement (Chavkin, 1991), but it is also a strong indicator of student success, even after student academic abilities and family socioeconomic status are taken into account (Rasmussen, 1988). Despite an increase in awareness of the importance of parental involvement for student success, efforts made by school staff to involve parents in their children’s education vary greatly.

In a synthesis of research of early studies on effective schools—such as those reported by Edmonds (1979, 1982)—research has found the involvement and support of parents to be one of their major characteristics of success (see also Firestone & Herriott 1982; Lightfoot, 1978; Purkey & Smith, 1985). Moreover, in a recent study of Hispanic schools along the Texas/Mexico border where student performance ratings were among the highest in the state (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999), researchers found that staff members created a welcoming environment for parents by building on their cultural values: stressing personal contact and communication while facilitating structural accommodations that encouraged parental involvement. Unfortunately however, these schools, both in historical and contemporary terms, are atypical.

Many schools still make little or no effort to involve parents in their children’s schooling in meaningful ways (Paredes Scribner, 1999; Young, 1996). Staff members of these schools often encounter barriers in the creation and maintenance of what one would consider “effective” parental involvement programs (Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1989, 1996; Lightfoot, 1978). For

instance, school staff members are often uncertain about how to involve parents while maintaining their role as professionals or “experts” in the school setting (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Epstein & Becker, 1982). Their unwillingness to turn over part of the educational responsibility to parents may be attributed to uncertainties that surround previous failed attempts to effectively include parents in the educational process. Possible biases and attitudes of school officials about either the appropriateness of parent involvement in “professional” matters, in addition to class and racial stereotypes, may prevent them from treating parents as partners, and thus deter them from forming genuine connections with parents (Becher, 1986).

In addition, bureaucracy within the public school may discourage parents from voicing their concerns, complaints, and demands regarding their children’s schooling (Becher, 1986; Fine, 1993). This is not to say that no opportunities exist for authentic interactions between school personnel and parents. At issue here is that when these opportunities do occur, they often are unidimensional and superficial, with school professionals meeting with parents only when problems occur. Under such circumstances, parents frequently are perceived as lacking the resources (i.e., experience, know-how, etc.) to provide meaningful home educational experiences for their children. Such beliefs may only serve to further alienate parents from their children’s schooling and reify a deficit mentality (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Harry, 1992; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Stein, 1983; Young, 1996).

Not surprisingly, many parents perceive their roles and educational responsibilities as being distinctively different and nonrelated to what school teachers and administrators who work with their children believe they should be (Nieto, 1987; Parra & Henderson, 1982; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). Although school staff believe “parental involvement” is defined as participating in organized activities at school, parents—particularly marginalized parents—view their contributions to school success in terms of informal activities such as providing nurturance, instilling cultural values, talking with their children, sending them to school clean and rested, checking homework, and a variety of other nontraditional activities (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Valdés, 1996).

Indeed, current parental involvement practices tend to focus on the more traditional or formal practices, such as increasing participation in parent advisory groups or committees and drawing parents into working with their children on academic tasks at home. In other words, schools tend to define parent involvement as either a way of supporting student academic achievement, or in terms of participation at formal school-initiated functions. Intervention programs most often give parents specific guidelines, materials, and/or training to carry out school-like activities in the home. Such efforts are believed to strengthen home-school ties by transmitting the culture of schooling through families.

Not only do these efforts, intentionally or unintentionally, seek to change the culture within families in subtle ways (Sigel & Laosa, 1983), but the implicit assumption is that parents who are not involved in these ways

lack the capacity to provide adequate home learning environments for their children (Auerbach, 1989). Because research suggests that the vast majority of marginalized parents remain “uninvolved” in their children’s schooling (Chavkin, 1993), this assumption has the potential of perpetuating a potentially dangerous stereotype.

Despite the existence of a few exceptional schools that build on the cultural values of parents, schools in general still tend to limit parental involvement practices to the more formal activities that ignore the culturally specific perspectives of minority populations. Very little effort has been expended on the part of the schools to experiment with or develop less traditional forms of involvement that may be more directly applicable to marginalized groups (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992, 1993; Gándara, 1995; Valdés, 1996). These 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).

Thus, an underlying argument of this study is that current parental involvement policies and practices still privilege these “mainstream” involvement forms (Lightfoot, 1978). This constitutes a deficit perspective that not only diminishes the culturally specific perspectives of minority populations, but more importantly, deflects attention away from the professional responsibility of schools to establish effective parental involvement programs for marginalized groups (Valencia, 1997). Programs that bridge the gap between formal and informal parental involvement activities must begin by building on each family’s cultural values, beliefs, and economic positionality (Hidalgo, 1998; Valdés, 1996).

This process, however, is complicated by the fact that the research on effective parental involvement practices for marginalized groups—especially migrant populations—is limited (López, Scribner, & Walling, 1998). Nevertheless, research suggests that elements of effective practices for mainstream groups may also apply to underrepresented communities. For example, Williams and Chavkin (1989) posit seven elements common to all promising parental involvement programs: (a) written policies that specifically address parental involvement, (b) sufficient resources that keep programs running, (c) ongoing training that prepares staff and parents, (d) approaches that foster partnerships between schools and families, (e) two-way interactions that allow for regular and frequent communication, (f) networking with other programs that facilitates external collaboration, and (g) procedures or measures that allow for continuous evaluation. These elements, coupled with culturally sensitive outreach efforts and effective communication with parents, are the foundation for successful parental involvement programs for marginalized groups (Chavkin, 1996).

In line with these recommendations, Martínez (1988) advocates grounding parental education programs in more informal approaches, such as experiential learning, rather than in the more traditional classroom approach. In addition to pointing to the need for schools to hire parental involvement

coordinators who understand the migrant culture and act as liaisons between migrant families and school staff, current evidence also suggests the importance of collaboration between schools, social service agencies, and other community or grassroots organizations (Becher, 1986; Brown, 1989; Chavkin, 1991; Chavkin & González, 1995; Coleman, 1991; Dyson, 1983; Lontos, 1991; Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995; Rasmussen, 1988; Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986; Sosa, 1996; Young, 1996).

Migrant families, however, find the involvement process to be increasingly complex because of the multiple barriers they must overcome in their continuously changing lifestyle (Berry-Cabán, 1983; Chavkin, 1996; Sosa, 1996). Schools, therefore, must be able to effectively negotiate these barriers if they are to be successful in working with this population (López, Scribner, & Walling, 1998). It is thus clear that migrant-impacted schools cannot rely on research that sets forth a predetermined or generic set of "parental involvement" approaches. Instead, they must seriously consider the conditions, concerns, and culture of the migrant community and adjust their parental involvement programs in order to be effective with this group (Auerbach, 1989; Valdés, 1996).

Significance and Purpose of Study

Given the limited volume of literature that directly addresses parental involvement in migrant communities, discussions on this topic have drawn largely from general parental involvement studies or from those that focus on the general population of Mexican Americans and/or other Hispanic Americans. However, as we have discussed above, the migrant population clearly has needs that are particular to the conditions of migrancy that make parental involvement an increasingly complex process. Because there is a paucity of literature that addresses effective parental involvement practices that are particular to the specific needs of migrant families, it is essential that researchers take positive steps to fill this gap in the literature. This study is an affirmative step in this direction.

The central purpose of this study was to examine school districts with large migrant populations that have effective parental involvement programs in place. Specifically, researchers sought to identify effective involvement strategies and practices that could be recommended for adoption in similar school settings elsewhere.¹ Grounded in a migrant-specific research context (Hidalgo, 1998), this study not only facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of parental involvement for migrant families, but also carries important implications for local, state, and federal educational policies that address all marginalized groups.

Method

The methodology used to gather the data for this study was primarily qualitative in nature. Although initial criteria for school selection were driven by quantitative factors, researchers gathered data through interviews, observations, and other relevant documents. In determining the "successful" school

districts for selection in this study, researchers turned to the Migrant Education Office of the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which provided data on school districts praised for doing an exceptional job with migrant students. The Migrant/TEA selection criteria commended migrant-impacted school districts that have attained at least an 80% migrant graduation rate, an 80% migrant promotion rate, and a 94% migrant school attendance rate.²

However, this district-level commendation data provided little information about the performance of individual schools in these districts. To address this issue, researchers turned to the 1995–1996 Public Education Information Management System database, which provided school-level data of student performance on the state standardized test: the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Researchers used this database to identify 15 exceptional schools³ in 5 commended migrant-impacted districts in which migrant students had attained at least a 70% passing rate on all areas (i.e., math, reading, and writing) of the TAAS.

Although the data provided a preliminary tool for selecting schools and districts for this study, researchers needed additional information that would gauge the effectiveness of the parental involvement programs in these selected schools. To this effect, the research team worked closely with the staff at the TEA Migrant Education Office. Their knowledge of highly effective school districts and their respective parental involvement components proved indispensable in the final selection process.

As a result, a purposeful sample of four school districts with recognized parental involvement programs (three districts in Texas, and one “migrant-receiving” school district in Illinois⁴) were selected for this study. Researchers then began the process of interviewing key personnel at both the district and building levels. These individuals included building- and district-level administrators, migrant program personnel, schoolteachers, community liaisons, and other school paraprofessionals. Parents themselves were also interviewed whenever possible. In addition, researchers interviewed state-level administrators who provided critical information about the effectiveness of parental involvement programs in the selected school districts.

A total of 17 interviews (12 group interviews and 5 individual interviews) and extensive observations were conducted throughout a 5-month period. Researchers relied on a semistructured interview protocol to gather data from informants. This method enabled researchers to obtain a level of consistency across school districts, while allowing researchers to explore new concepts, ideas, and issues raised during interviews. The group interviews were planned by district-level personnel⁵ and always included a building-level administrator (usually a principal or assistant principal), a school counselor or social worker, the parent involvement coordinator or community liaison for the school, and occasionally a parent or teacher (See Table 1). Although most of our interviews were scheduled in advance, there were times when impromptu “interviews” were conducted. This method was particularly effective, especially in moments when formal methods were inap-

Table 1
Type of Interview Conducted at Each Research Site

District	Participating campuses/offices	Type of interview: group	Type of interview: individual
La Joya (TX) Independent School District	E.B. Reyna Elementary	1 ^c	
	La Joya High School	1 ^a	
	District Offices	2	1
Weslaco (TX) Independent School District	Margo Elementary	1 ^{ab}	
	Cuellar Middle School Black Intermediate	1 ^a	1
	Weslaco High School	1 ^a	
	District Offices	1	
Mission (TX) Independent School District	Cavazos Elementary White Junior High	1 ^c	1
	Mission Ninth Grade Campus	1 ^{ab}	
	District Offices		1
Princeville (IL) Community Unit School District #326	Princeville Summer Migrant Program/Princeville Grade School	1 ^b	1
	Seven Oaks Migrant Head Start Program	1 ^a	

^aIndicates there was at least 1 parent present at the group interview.

^bIndicates there was at least 1 teacher present at the group interview.

^cIndicates this interview as conducted solely with parents.

propriate (e.g., car ride discussions, lunch discussions, etc.). Most interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length, with the longest interview lasting over 130 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the consent of the informants. Data analysis proceeded according to the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), Huberman and Miles (1994), Patton (1990), and Coffey and Atkinson (1996), and included computer-assisted and manual interview coding according to significant themes, as well as the utilization of case and cross-case analysis. In addition, trustworthiness was facilitated through prolonged engagement at the research site, the testing of rival explanations, and the triangulation of sources and analysts (Patton, 1990).

Results

Our findings suggest that the main criterion for successful parental involvement programs is an unwavering commitment to meet the multiple needs of migrant families above all other involvement considerations. In other words, the migrant-impacted schools and districts in this study firmly believed that before any type of substantive “involvement” could be expected of parents, they first needed to address the social, economic, and physical needs of migrant families. This process required an awareness of each family’s social and economic position, as well as knowledge of the multiple social services available in the community that can assist parents in meeting their needs in a more holistic fashion. The picture that unfolds, therefore, details how these successful migrant-impacted schools and districts generated this awareness of migrant family needs, mobilizing school and community agencies in order to facilitate the involvement process for migrant parents.

Creating an Awareness of Migrant Family Needs

Of all the themes included in this discussion, this was perhaps the characteristic that was most prevalent in our interviews, suggesting that migrant-impacted schools spend a vast amount of time identifying and tending to the multiple needs of migrant families. Whether it is through home visits or through tacit experience, our informants expressed the need to know families on a more personal level, and felt that without this knowledge, it would be very difficult to understand the lived reality of migrants:

Roughly 65% of my students at this campus come from the *Colonias* [i.e., developing areas or “Colonies” surrounding the U.S./Mexico border usually characterized by high poverty and gross infrastructural problems]. What we’ve done at the beginning, just to educate our staff, we took buses out there to show them where some of our kids are coming from. You drive out there, and you can understand where the kid’s coming from. You really need to go out there. . . . We often beat [students] over the head saying “Johnny, how come you didn’t do this assignment?” Well go out to his house and find out why, and you’ll know. That’s not what he’s worried about! (Building-Level Administrator, Cuellar Middle School, Weslaco Independent School District [ISD])

Understanding the socio-cultural context of migrancy and being aware of family needs was repeatedly addressed by individuals as one of the most important aspects of working with this population. They recognized that financial barriers often limit the physical and social resources of families, placing enhanced demands on parents to provide basic necessities (e.g., food, clothes, school supplies, etc.) for their children. Most, if not all, of our respondents, stated they make every effort to meet these needs as best and as quickly as possible, fully recognizing that these needs translate into academic barriers for both the student and parent.

Other informants discussed the immediacy of meeting migrants' physical needs—particularly those needs that emerge from economic hardships—and the need to know what these families experience on a daily basis in order to better serve them:

Informant: We've been out in the community since day one that we started working. We know which families are needy. For example, that family that lives over there. They have a dirt floor, no running water. Think about it, you know. What would you do without running water? I'd go crazy, you know? And to them it is an every day experience. I went to visit [name of family] the other day; the ones who live over on [name of road]. You know, the little house where they don't have running water or electricity or anything?

Researcher: Yes, I think I know which one you're talking about. We drove by there yesterday.

Informant: Well, I went over there at, like, 6:15 p.m. and they had candles inside the house. And my husband asked, "What do they do when it gets dark?" Well, they go to sleep, I said. Because they can't hear the radio. They can't see television. They can't call anyone because they don't have a phone. They can't read a book or magazine or a newspaper, *porque no hay luz* [because there's no electricity]. So, he said, "*¿y qué hacen?*" [what do they do?]" I said, *se acuestan temprano y se levantan temprano* [they go to sleep early and they wake up early]. That's how they live, OK? And there's no bathroom in there!

Researcher: Yes, I remember seeing the outhouses in that area.

Informant: Can you imagine going to the outhouse? You know, I went into the shed at night and I was freezing my legs. Can you imagine going into the outhouse at night in the dark? *Un alacrán* [A scorpion] or something there *te puede picar* [can sting you], you know? And the things we take for granted, these people experience every day. So, that is why we . . . [have to] know their whole life story, in order to better serve them (District-Level Administrators, Group Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD).

Getting to know each family's "life story" was a recurrent theme that emerged in this study. This emphasis helps them assess the multiple needs of families, and allows them to understand first-hand the hardships migrant families face on a daily basis.

Given these economic conditions, it is not surprising that a migrant parent's preoccupation is something other than being "involved" in traditionally sanctioned ways. Our finding suggests that many successful school

districts fully recognize this fact, but do not see the lived reality of these families as an obstacle or a deterrent. In other words, successful school districts believe that if they make every attempt to ameliorate some of these family needs, parental involvement will be a more feasible possibility for families.

Tacit Knowledge of Migrant Family Needs

In addition, our research suggests that many migrant and parental involvement personnel could directly identify with the migrant experience. Many of them have been former migrants themselves and/or have family members who have migrated seasonally in search of work. As such, the background of these individuals not only provides them with a unique insight into the complex needs of migrant families, but it also allows them to “connect” with families on a deeper, more personal level. This does not suggest that non-migrants are incapable of empathizing with the migrant experience, but it does suggest the lived experience of migrancy allows them to better understand the clientele with whom they work:

I was taking a college class during the fall semester and [a colleague] comes into the classroom and [asks] . . . “Did anybody see the news? Did they say that there was a cold front coming in?” And someone in the class said, “Yes, it is supposed to be cold tomorrow.” “Oh, no!” she says, “*Mañana* [Tomorrow], all the kids are going to smell horrible: like *brasas* [hot coals/embers]!” She went like that! And, man, I don’t know, but when she said that, I looked at her and I told her: “You know what? When I was little, I smelled like *brasas*, too. But you know what? I couldn’t take a bath in the morning inside my house. I would take a bath at night. And the only thing that my parents had to warm us with was *brasas*,” I told her. “And I think as a teacher and a counselor, if that is how you feel, then maybe you should look for another profession.” And she was like, “Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that!” And I said, “It is comments like that,” I said, “if you haven’t been there, you’ll never know how to deal with migrants or how to develop a relationship with those kids. Because you’ll just be putting up a front but you won’t be giving your heart.” You know? “If you’ve never been there, you’ll never have that feeling. You’ll never know what it’s like.” (District-Level Administrator, Group Interview at District Offices, La Joya, ISD)

This narrative not only highlights the power of the insider perspective and the value of shared experience, but it also points to the danger of being insensitive to the economic conditions and needs of migrant families. It clearly demonstrates how a person’s comments emerge from a deficit mentality, preventing individuals from recognizing the strengths of migrancy while curtailing the possibility of forming genuine alliances with migrant families.

Our research suggests that school personnel could, because of their personal experience as migrants, readily identify with the migrant experience and could connect with families on a level that is more sympathetic and understanding of their condition. Their experience as migrants provided a

unique vantage point that recognized the complex needs of migrant families in a nonjudgmental way. As such, they were able to “give their hearts,” not only to their profession as educators, but more important, to the migrant families whom they served.

Home Visits

Although tacit knowledge provides a general understanding of the migrant lifestyle, schools felt they also needed to know the specific needs of migrant families in their districts, in order to better address their needs. Home visits were the primary vehicle through which our informants became aware of these needs. In other words, in the successful schools and districts we visited, making home visits was a top priority for everyone:

At the beginning of the school year, [Name] Elementary went house by house in their whole zone. . . . Everybody—the counselors, the librarian, the clerks, the paraprofessionals—went to visit families. Everybody’s home was visited at least once by somebody in the school in a positive fashion. OK? They told [parents] “*Mire Señora, queremos que sepa que en la escuela nos importa su hija o hijo y queremos saber dónde vive y si le podemos ayudar en algo, estamos para servirle.* [Look Miss, we want you to know that we care about your daughter or son and we want to know where you live and if we can help you in any way, we are here to serve you.]” And we began to get parents who said, “They care to come out here on an afternoon, when it’s hot, you know, and visit? They really care about us!” (District-Level Administrator, Individual Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD)

These home visits not only help faculty, administration, and staff become aware of the social context of students, but they also allow school personnel to develop more personal relationships with families.

A good number of school and building level administrators in our study referred to the Islamic parable of Mohammed and the mountain to explain the philosophy behind the home visit: “If Mohammed can’t go to the mountain then the mountain must go to Mohammed.” This philosophy recognizes that school organizations need to be proactive when working with migrant parents and cannot simply expect them to enter schools on their own. When families are faced with social and economic hardships on a daily basis, it becomes difficult for them to negotiate the involvement process. Through home visits, educators can gain a better awareness of family needs and identify routes for intervention accordingly.⁶

Continuous Interaction With Families

Closely related with the above theme is the continuous interaction school personnel have with migrant families, which is necessary in order for schools to be aware of a families’ shifting needs. Our research finds that school personnel do an exceptional job in making sure every family is personally contacted, and that this contact is continuous throughout the academic year. This contact is so pervasive that individuals get to know families for an

extended period of time and are able to foster genuine relationships with them:

Informant 1: You can go back to central office right now and you can tell them the physical location where you were and what you saw, and they'll know exactly who the family is. Because *ellas, las recruiters, han tenido esa area* for a long time [because they, the recruiters,⁷ have had that area for a long time].

Informant 2: And it's good that it takes place because if I had that area for 5 years, I know every single house that had been coming up in that *Colonia* for the past 5 years. If you keep rotating them, they won't know the families and won't be able to connect with them (District-Level Administrators, Group Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD).

In this particular case, the migrant recruiter plays a critical role in maintaining continuous contact with parents. Although the job description of a migrant recruiter does not include "involvement" per se, the type of connection they make with families facilitates the involvement process by breaking down the barriers between the home and the school:

I think that when the migrant families return to their home base [i.e., Texas], it makes it easier because they know the people, they know the migrant recruiters because they're here the majority of the time. So, that also has a lot to do with it. They feel comfortable here. The recruiters have been the same recruiters for the past 15 years, you know? So parents are comfortable with them and they are also comfortable with the parents. They have that kind of relationship with parents. (District-Level Administrator, Mission 9th Grade Campus, Mission ISD)

Because the migrant recruiters are a stable component of the migrant program in these schools, they get to know families for an extended period of time, and are thus able to quickly assess the needs of families when they return to their home state. Research suggests when relationships with families are both genuine and continuous, student success is likely to ensue (Sosa, 1996). The findings in this study suggest it is through continuous and genuine interaction that these successful school districts manage to build such meaningful relationships with families.

Commitment to Meeting Migrant Family Needs

One of the key factors that has proven successful for those districts that effectively work with migrants is the unique ability of the school staff to make an expressed commitment to meet migrant family needs. In fact, our research suggests that these individuals are a critical component in the success of the parental involvement program. District and building level administrators fully recognize this fact, and have made every effort to selectively hire individuals with specific leadership qualities:

Every . . . staff member has to, and I'm going to use the word in Spanish because that's how I see it: "*tienen ángel.*" I don't know if you've heard of the expression "*tienen ángel.*" It is like "having an-

López, Scribner, and Mabitivanichcha

gels” or more like having those traits or those gifts that come with the territory and with the job. And if we get people that don’t have those skills then it’s going to be useless for the administration. So this system has been very selective of hiring people with those skills. And if one of them doesn’t really have those skills sharpened, then we need to make sure that they really want to continue staying here and they are devoted to our parents and they *are* going to get these skills sharpened in order to work with them. If not, it’ll be useless. (District-Level Administrator, Margo Elementary School, Weslaco ISD)

The qualities and skills highlighted in this quote engender “angelic” or caring/loving behaviors (Noddings, 1992) that allow school personnel to connect with families on a personal—rather than a professional—level. They engender sensitivity to, and awareness of, the migrant lifestyle without prejudging families or their ability to succeed. They engender the capacity to access a family’s life history and gain knowledge of family needs without losing dignity and respect for those families. They engender a certain level of self-investment and commitment/dedication that is grounded in compassion and benevolence. And finally, they engender a transformational orientation rooted in the belief that they need to do “whatever it takes” to connect with family members in order to better serve them.

We feel these personal qualities are the backbone of the success we witnessed in these schools and districts. Everyone in these organizations, from migrant recruiters to program directors, knows these are qualities they must hone if they are to be effective in working with migrant parents. As such, school personnel function from a unique epistemological orientation that is grounded in sensitivity and commitment to the migrant community. In our research, we found that school personnel, at both the district and building level, have a firm belief in “going the extra mile” to meet the needs of migrant families. It is this high level of dedication that make parental involvement a success in the schools and districts we visited.

Placing Priorities on Families

For example, in our study, it quickly became evident that school personnel made a pledge to serve these families in whatever way possible. Many of our respondents regarded parents as their top priority and felt they needed to develop a relationship with families that demonstrates this heightened level of commitment:

Who is our client? Who is our number one client? For me, it’s the parent. If I am talking to you and [a parent] comes in and says, “Miss . . . I really need to talk to you.” (Snaps finger) “Hey, [to researcher], I will speak to you in a minute, OK? Let me see what that parent wants.” Because she is my job, OK? She is my number one client. *Tu vienes ahora y te vas mañana* [You’re here today and you’re gone tomorrow]. And you know, I might never see you again in my whole life, OK? But she *is* going to be here. She is the one that I need to have, you know, *que esté bien contenta* [to be very happy]. (District-Level Administrator, Group Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD)

In this particular example, our informant positioned parents as her “number one client,” and warned researchers that she would stop the interview session if a parent were in need of her assistance. Similarly, other school personnel we interviewed regarded parents as critical in the educational process, and felt they needed to develop a special relationship with families—a relationship that superceded typical home-school affiliations.

In other words, migrant families were not perceived as temporary agents but as long-term “clients” who happen to be temporarily away from the community. In this regard, the commitment to migrant families was year-round—despite the fact that migrants were there only part of the academic year. Migrant families were perceived as a vital part of the community, and these organizations truly believed they needed to establish a long-term commitment to these families if they were to be successful in developing a relationship that was grounded in trust. This trust, in turn, would serve as the foundation for getting to know the life history of migrant parents in order to better serve their needs.

Establishing Relational Bonds

When school personnel are willing to put the needs of families as their highest priority, dynamic relationships are bound to flourish. Our research suggests district- and building-level personnel develop meaningful relationships with parents. In fact, many of our informants often referred to parents and families in the relational form (e.g., “my parents” or “my families”), suggesting their professional relationship had been transformed into something more personal, special and/or familial. Our informants were well aware of the bond they established with families and cherished these types of informal relationships with parents over others. As one district-level administrator commented (under conditions of anonymity):

We need to develop that special relationship with families, you know? Sometimes I have been told, “Hey Miss, you’re supposed to be over there having meetings with the superintendent and sharing with the superintendent the things that you do. So that you can be up there with, like, the big people.” And then I tell them, “Hey, superintendents in our district and in other districts, they change very often. I live in this community; I’m local. If I live and develop a relationship with these families, and if I stay here and I get a flat tire on the highway, I guarantee you that somebody that has taken ESL, GED, Citizenship, Sewing, Nutrition, one of those classes, is going to pass and say, ‘Was that Miss [Name]?’ ” . . . I am almost positive that they will come up to me and say, “What is it that you need, Miss? Let me give you a lift to the store” or “I have a cellular phone, you make a phone call.” And what is the superintendent going to give me if he is in another district?

In other words, school- and district-level personnel in these school districts firmly believe in establishing a relational bond with parents; a bond that is both profound and mutual in nature.

Because they could readily identify with these families, and because they constantly interacted with them on a regular basis, school personnel

consistently used this and other terms of affection and/or familialism (e.g., “*abuelita*” or “little grandmother,” “*comadre*” or co-mother, etc.) when making reference to specific families in the school and/or district. Administrators and school personnel made every effort to contact and communicate with families, usually on an individual or “face-to-face” basis. Informants felt this type of personal contact was essential to their success, and were constantly communicating with families through home visits, phone calls, and community meetings. As a district-level parental involvement coordinator cogently summarized:

This isn't a job where you punch in at eight and punch out at three. My parents know they can call me 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, *para lo que necesiten* [for whatever they need]. They're like *familia* [family], you know? . . . They know I'm here for them. (Building-Level Administrator, Princeville Summer Migrant Program, Princeville CUSD)

Investing in Families

In short, we found that personnel in these migrant-impacted schools and districts make great investments in the parents and families with whom they work. These school representatives have such a high degree of commitment to these families that they often make great personal sacrifices (time, money, missed meals, footwork, “wear and tear” on their automobiles, etc.) to do the job they feel is necessary to meet the family’s needs. These personal sacrifices are rarely documented as “work,” rarely paid, and very seldom recognized.

This level of investment in migrant families attests to the fact that many individuals who work with parents often go above and beyond their call of duty to perform their jobs. Many make great efforts to meet parental needs, often sacrificing personal time to meet with parents after work hours, or over the weekend. As one state-level administrator commented, “I can tell you right now, everyone in that school district is doing 100 or 300 or 1000% more than what they’re telling you they do” (State-Level Administrator, Princeville Summer Migrant Program, Princeville CUSD).

Such an investment reflects the caring and deep concern school personnel have for the migrant families they serve on a daily basis. Just as investors “care” about the value of their stock, so do school faculty and staff “care” about what happens to “their” parents. Many of our informants talked about “dropping everything” when crisis befalls a migrant family:

We had a thunderstorm, kind of like a tornado, that went by our community and it tore off the roofs, tipped over trailer houses, and stuff like that. We canceled everything for the following day and into the weekend, we were out visiting families. You know, calling in the Red Cross, Salvation Army, getting donations from the campuses. With [my] pickup, we helped them haul furniture and stuff like that. It's just really a part of us to do it. . . . Everyone was there: the superintendent, the teachers, the principal, the counselors. And I think that is why we've been able to do a good job, because we really care

about what happens to these families. (District Level Administrator, Individual Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD)

In other words, the districts we observed had personnel and staff members who were exceptional. Their dedication to migrant families was manifested in countless unpaid “work” hours, endless home visits, and “a strong commitment to do whatever it takes so that these families do not suffer as much as [they themselves] did” (Building-Level Administrator, Seven Oaks Migrant Head Start Program, Princeville CUSD).

Moving Beyond Needs: Empowering Parents to Get Involved

In the schools and districts we studied, school staff made an expressed commitment to meet the multiple needs of migrant families, fully recognizing that if these needs were not met, parents would be unable (or perhaps unwilling) to be involved in traditionally sanctioned ways. In other words, our research findings suggest that effective migrant-impacted schools operated within an organizational culture that focused on solutions to family problems and not necessarily the problems themselves:

I tell parents “When you get to the financial end, the economic end, we can take care of that. We are going to help you with that. Don’t worry about that. Just pretend that that’s not there. What we need is you. . . . I’m doing everything I can, but I can only do so much. . . . [U]ltimately, the ball is in your park and you throw it any way you wish. . . . It’s up to you.” (Building-Level Administrator, Black Intermediate School, Weslaco ISD)

The fact that parents are made to feel that they are not alone when facing economic and physical hardships, helps mitigate the stress associated with poverty. This relief—however minor and/or temporary—helps parents better focus on their children’s education and encourages healthier involvement forms with their children. Offering “solutions” to economic problems and making parents feel that educational success is also dependent on their interactions with their children help remind parents that children’s needs extend beyond the economic and/or physical realm.

This cognitive transition helps migrant parents focus more on becoming formally involved in school settings and enables them to feel as though they have “ownership” over the involvement process:

Informant 1: One thing with the parents . . . is that I never put a restriction or limit on them. I never say that she can’t do it [because they don’t] have the money or the skills or whatever. But I always make sure that they learn something. And that’s another thing, I don’t do the teaching. In the beginning I did, because I was the only one here. But now, other parents do the teaching and they teach the other parents. . . . Now my parent center runs by itself, I mean, I’m there, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t need to tell them what to do. I don’t want to baby-sit them.

Informant 2: (interjecting) When we were walking in, you probably saw two ladies at a bulletin board. Those were parents. Migrant parents. They feel ownership of what they’re doing. They take pride that

López, Scribner, and Mabitivanichcha

they're fixing the bulletin board outside the parent center. We didn't tell them to do it. They did it by themselves.

Informant 1: (continuing) And I do the same thing when I go out there to the *Colonias*. I tell them that there's other ways [of being] involved than just financially . . . I give them options that would better their child, and from there, they take it. I'm going to push them a little bit, but I don't want to make it that obvious (Building-Level Administrators, Margo Elementary, Weslaco ISD).

As the above statement suggests, migrant parents tend to perceive involvement as primarily attending to the immediate economic/financial needs of their families. However, because the school system mitigates this responsibility—by connecting families to a web of social and health services that support the entire family's well-being—parents begin to view their involvement in a much broader fashion.

These high expectations are part of the school culture and play an important role in the way parents are viewed by school professionals and paraprofessionals. If parents are viewed in nonfavorable terms, then the expectation placed on them is minimal; relegating them to marginal players in the schooling process. However, if parents are viewed as central to education's goal—and as essential players in their child's education—then parents will feel as though their input is highly valued and respected. In these effective contexts, high expectations are placed on parents, and parents, in turn, feel empowered to get involved in their children's education in new and fundamentally different ways.

Strategic Methods for Encouraging Parental Involvement

In our study, it was also evident that the tools used by educators to get parents involved were many and varied. Oftentimes, going out to the community, or advertising through traditional means (flyers, announcements, etc.) were not effective. In these cases, individuals relied on nontraditional methods (radio, television, phone calls) to solicit parental participation. However, even these nontraditional formats were ineffective in reaching migrant parents. Our findings indicate that, in these cases, schools and districts utilized strategic or “savvy” methods to get migrant parents involved in school matters:

Last year [the community liaison at the] high school, went elementary by elementary to recruit migrant parents. And she talked to a lot of parents that also had kids at the high school. She'd tell the parents “on such and such a day we are going to meet at the high school. It is urgent. You know, too many of the migrant kids are not passing the TAAS and we don't know why that is. And the teachers are really looking at objectives and still the kids are not scoring high. There is an urgency. We need to get together. We need to work together. We need to do something.” *N' hombre* [slang: “Let me tell you”], that was really effective! That was one of the first meetings at high school that has had over 700 parents. (District Level Administrator, La Joya High School, La Joya ISD)

Redefining Involvement

In this instance, the community liaison had knowledge that parents were more involved in the elementary grades than in the high school. By going to the elementary schools to recruit parents of high school students, this person was able to generate awareness of the meeting and bring parents into the school on a particular evening. In other cases, parent involvement personnel relied on incentives (food, gifts, door prizes) to bring migrant parents into the school:

Before [the scheduled meeting] I went . . . into the dollar store and I picked up like \$300 or \$400 worth of hygiene items. And then I distributed them to all of the families. I knew the migrant families were going to start working [at the time of the meeting], so it was going to be difficult to bring them in. But I distributed them to the families and had them fill out the forms for the COEs [certificate of eligibility for the migrant program] at the same time. It was a big success. (State-Level Administrator, Princeville Summer Migrant Program, Princeville CUSD)

In this particular case, the personal-hygiene items fulfilled an economic need of migrant families, but also functioned as an incentive to bring parents to the meeting. The awareness of the potential time conflict made the administrator realize that without an incentive, parents would probably forego attendance at the meeting. Her ability to think of a rapid solution probably saved her from having to reschedule another event altogether.

Other individuals relied on more tactical ways to get migrant parents involved. In the excerpt that follows, a building level paraprofessional discusses how she gets parents “hooked” through specific projects of interest—and once on campus, she has parents perform certain school duties:

I do projects that are of interest to migrants. Projects like sewing or arts and crafts like those *recuerdos* [keepsakes] they give at *quinceañeras* [coming of age parties for Latinas] or weddings, or baptisms. Things they can make and sell to earn some extra money. Anyway, I call all the parents to be here on such-and-such a date. This is the attraction, this is the “hook” to get them in here. Once they’re here I say to them “OK, we are going to stop right now, we are going to the cafeteria, and we are going to do some cafeteria monitoring for an hour or so, and then we are going to come back and continue.” But then they’ll come back the following day because they really want to finish the project [they started]. (Building-Level Paraprofessional, La Joya High School, La Joya ISD)

In short, the strategies and tactics utilized by principals, administrators, and other personnel to get migrant parents to come to the school were many and varied. Some relied on subtle processes, while others resorted to more savvy influence techniques. We believe the reason they were so effective was because they fulfilled an immediate need in migrant households. Once parents arrived at the school site, educators were able to expose parents and family members to other ways in which they could be involved in the educational process.

Providing a Welcoming Environment

An additional factor that played a key role in encouraging parental participation was that schools made every attempt to foster a welcoming environment that was conducive to dialogic interaction. The schools and districts we visited firmly believed if parents felt genuinely welcomed on the school campus, and were treated with respect and dignity, future involvement would be a likely possibility:

I think what works best is . . . your attitude is toward the parents. You always have to make them feel welcome. If you make them feel welcome, you make them feel a part of this involvement and you'll have their support. But once you try to feel that you are above them, and that you are better educated . . . then you won't have [their support]. So you need to come down to their level. This is one thing that I learned: Go down to their level and they will feel welcomed and they feel happy to be here at the school. But if you make them come, and you are going to push them around and you are going to tell them what to do, you are not going to have them here very long. (Building-Level Paraprofessional, La Joya High School, La Joya ISD)

This notion of “going down to the parent’s level” was repeated throughout many of our discussions. When prodded if such a belief viewed parents in an inferior way, our informants defended their positions by highlighting the bureaucratic/formal nature of many school organizations:

Think about it, you sit down with a parent—let’s say, myself, a counselor, the social worker, and a couple of teachers—in a room like this. Chances are [this person] speaks very little or no English. The parent is intimidated already! They’re looking around and [there are] five people with ties and suits on. That’s a scary process for a parent. It’s too formal, too academic. . . . [But] if we sit down and chat in a more informal context, they start to feel more comfortable with the institution. So that’ll draw the parent in. Now the parent’s not afraid. Now the parents will come here to campus and start getting involved with their kids. That’s what we’re trying to do: break down some of those barriers. (School-Level Administrator, Cuellar Middle School, Weslaco ISD)

By breaking down the formal/bureaucratic barriers and providing a welcoming school environment for parents, these school districts have managed to be successful in getting parents involved in the educational process. Unlike other research which identifies a welcoming environment by the physical surroundings of the school (e.g., brightly colored bulletin boards, welcome banners, etc.), our research suggests that school personnel in these districts understood this concept as rooted in one’s attitude and demeanor toward parents. In other words, school personnel fully recognized the fact that “barriers” were both physical and attitudinal in nature, and that both needed to be addressed if schools were to be successful in getting migrant parents involved in their children’s education.

Affirming Parents and Families

Positive relationships also recognize parents for taking the initiative to be involved in the academic process. However, our research suggests that the concept of “parental involvement” is differentially constructed in these successful schools and districts. In fact, our research finds that involvement is much broader than parents simply coming to the campus to perform traditionally sanctioned activities:

Involvement means a combination of things. It means you [i.e., the parent] monitoring your child every day. You checking and talking to your child, communicating with your child and finding out what he’s [sic] doing. Where he’s having problems. . . . You know, what kind of needs he has. What kind of help he needs. Because you have to guide the child. That means, you communicating with the teacher. That means you monitoring his activities at the school. That means you trying to give him advice and trying to give him some kind of a road map and making sure that you tell him what you went through as a migrant so that he doesn’t have to [go through] the same things that you did. (State-Level Administrator, Princeville Summer Migrant Program, Princeville CUSD)

In these districts, the affirmation of parental micropractices is coupled with the belief that all children have the capacity of being successful in school, irrespective of their background or the hardships they face in their daily lives. In other words, our informants believed that one needed to have a positive attitude toward families if they were to be successful in getting them involved in their children’s education:

One of the things that we do . . . is that we identify those students that had perfect attendance, those students that passed all areas of the TAAS and were successful. We don’t honor the student, we honor the parents. We give parents a certificate. Because, we tell them, “through your efforts, and through your hard work, your child was able to accomplish this.” (School-Level Administrator, Black Intermediate School, Weslaco ISD)

In short, this theme was strongly repeated throughout our interviews, suggesting that a positive, affirming relationship with migrant parents was a necessary ingredient for their success. This includes affirming parents and other family members for valuing education and taking the initiative to ensure that their children were successful in school.

Providing Educational Services That Address Migrant Family Needs

The school districts we visited also offered many educational and vocational/skill programs for parents and other community members. Educational enhancement courses in English as a Second Language (ESL), Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED), and U.S. Citizenship were balanced with equally rich life-skill courses such as cake decorating, sewing, and plumbing. Fully recognizing migrants as a population that has one of the highest dropout rates and one of the lowest school completion rates in the nation, schools in

these districts made every effort to offer courses that would enrich the social and educational capital of the surrounding community.

These programmatic qualities are important factors in the success of the schools we visited precisely because they targeted specific needs within the community. Drawing upon their own resources, or resources outside the school campus, the schools and school districts in this study made parent education programs readily available to migrant parents. Generally speaking, two types of parent education programs were offered in these districts, each with a particular goal: (a) parent education aimed at increasing awareness, and (b) parent education aimed at self-improvement. These programs attempted to meet the educational and social needs of families with the hope of promoting student success by improving the social and educational capital available in migrant households.

Parent Education Aimed at Increasing Awareness

In the schools and districts we visited, parent education consists of formal and informal courses, lectures, and discussions which aim to generate an awareness of parental rights and responsibilities in the educational process. These educational interactions—usually advertised as informal “*pláticas*” or talks, but also addressed in more formal contexts such as organized parent meetings—provide migrant parents with education and training in a wide variety of areas. Such examples include appropriate student withdrawal procedures, awareness of transferable student courses, “red bag”⁸ training, and classes approved by the Environmental Protection Agency on the dangers and proper handling of pesticides. These classes/trainings are provided on a year-round basis to parents in the community, but are not offered exclusively to migrant parents. In other words these courses primarily benefit migrating families, but offer important information for all parents in the district:

We need to include all of the families within the district because it might be that you've never been a migrant . . . but all of a sudden here comes your *compadre* and he is telling you that there's a lot of work in Michigan or California or somewhere. And, you know, he gets you all hyped up and gets you excited: “*que hay mucho trabajo* [there's a lot of work] and housing” and all that. So, you just might head out there this summer and you would not have the red bag [training] where you have to put all your important documents. You would not have the pesticide card from the EPA, so you wouldn't be able to get into the field to work. . . . You wouldn't know about our 1-800 number, so you wouldn't know what to do just in case [you had a problem] while on the road. So, what we have done is we've scheduled these meetings throughout the school year. . . . We want *everybody* in the district to know that those services are available. (District-Level Administrator, Group Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD)

In this particular case, the district is fully aware that a person's migrant status might change from one year to the next, depending on individual life circumstances. Since the unemployment rate is typically high in the Texas Rio Grande Valley, they feel it is important to offer this type of parental educa-

tion on a continuous basis, not just to those families who migrate seasonally, but for everyone in the surrounding community.

In addition, migrant parents who may not have educational training in the United States, or may not have completed their high school education or equivalency exam, may also need other types of training to effectively intervene in their children's education while in another state:

We give [parents] information on the credit system: how many credits the kids need to graduate or to be promoted. And [we talk to them] about the TAAS, because some of the kids go and take the TAAS over in a different state. When they withdraw [prior to migrating], we ask parents to give us a warning 5 days in advance so that the kid can be able to take the test here and not have to go over there to take the test. . . . That way, parents can take with them their child's complete record. (Building-Level Administrator, District Offices, Weslaco ISD)

Given the fact that school districts in different states provide distinct course offerings, this type of education offered to parents is critical if migrant children are to progress at an equal rate as their non-migrant counterparts. In this regard, parent education programs in these districts generate an awareness of the multiple factors needed to efficiently withdraw children from one school district and enroll them in another, without sacrificing the student's academic progress.

Parent Education Aimed at Self-Improvement

Our study also found that the type of education and training offered by these successful schools aimed to establish a foundation for migrant self-improvement. These self-improvement courses take the form of GED classes, ESL classes, U.S. citizenship classes, and a host of other technical and trade courses (e.g., word processing, sewing, cake decorating, floral arrangement, plumbing, etc.) which aim to provide parents with concrete skills that can broaden the repertoire of human/family capital:

[We] scheduled a cake decorating class last month for families. . . . They had a session on Tuesday and another on Thursday. And by that first Thursday, when Mrs. [Name] came in, she was already decorating cakes with roses! I mean, it was something that just came naturally to her. Well, she and her family eventually migrated. And when she left, she called us from the state of Washington and wanted to know if we could fax her a copy of her certificate from the cake decorating class. She got employment right away, in something that wasn't migratory work! We got another one that got hired by [a supermarket] earning, I think, \$7.50 or \$7.00 an hour, also decorating cakes. Those are the types of trainings that, we hope, will develop a relationship between the parents and the schools where they'll feel that we're here to help them—not only in the academic success of their kids, but in any type of skill that we can teach them where they'll be able to work, but not as hard as they were when working in the fields. (District-Level Administrator, Individual Interview District Offices, La Joya ISD)

We feel that this type of commitment to improve the lives of migrants is what makes these school districts exceptional. The self-sufficiency classes/

trainings not only provide parents with alternative skills that can enhance their earning potential, but as the above quote suggests, they also offer viable alternatives to the strenuous nature and serious health risks associated with agricultural/migratory work.

Mobilizing Resources to Meet the Needs of Migrant Families

Often, collaboration with other social service agencies and/or community-based organizations becomes necessary in order to fulfill family needs—because schools are limited in what they can provide for families. As previously discussed, schools in this study offer various kinds of parent education classes to parents and other community members. However, there may be times when these types of trainings are limited due to insufficient resources in schools. Indeed, it is simply impossible for the school and/or district to single-handedly fulfill the various needs of all parents in the district. In these cases, it is imperative that schools network with other organizations—both within and outside the school system—in order to provide a comprehensive web of services that is readily available to families.

Collaboration Within the School System

Based on our observations and interviews, it became evident that individuals in these effective schools and/or districts were able to effectively work together in order to jointly provide services to migrant families. Indeed, there was an elaborate support network in place, where migrant program personnel (usually the first to identify a migrant family) work very closely with the parent involvement coordinators, who in turn work closely with other district and building-level personnel (as well as other social services and community organizations) to provide services to migrant families. This elaborate network was defined by effective communication from the time a migrant family would return to their home base until the time educational and social services were delivered. Such collaboration was a unique feature of these school districts, highlighting the web of resources working together to effectively meet the needs of these families. Some of our informants used the analogy of a puzzle, where several pieces “fit” together to provide a seamless web of comprehensive services to families.

When individuals work as part of a team, the collaborative effort is multiplied exponentially and the services available are expanded. This “team” concept has implications for how schools view their organizational structures. In these effective school districts, school services and federal programs (e.g., Migrant Education, Bilingual Education, Parent Involvement, Special Education, etc.) were less compartmentalized and more holistic in nature. Because they worked together as part of a team, these schools did not view themselves as an amalgamation of separate entities/units. Rather, they viewed themselves as a school-wide network whose main responsibility was to meet the economic and social needs of migrant families. This mentality was facilitated by the fact that migrants are often covered under many different categories:

We might have one student that is bilingual, migrant, and at risk—and he [sic] falls under all the different categories. What I am trying to tell you is that when we put together a project, an idea, a program, or a class, or something . . . we work real closely together, all the programs, and we have a real open communication to where we can go over and tell [a program director], “this is what we need and here is why we need it.” And [that program director] may not have that money in her budget, but she knows exactly who to go to be able to get money from maybe the Bilingual Program, the Vocational Ed. Program, the Title One Program, et cetera. And together, all of them will come up with the money because it is something good that is going to benefit these kids. (District-Level Administrator, Individual Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD)

By working together and by supporting each other, the alliance formed in these organizations is quite familial/interpersonal in nature. In other words, they rely on each other to pull their equal share when it comes to meeting student and family needs:

The first phrase that comes to my mind is “you’re only as good as your staff is.” You’ve got to have the support. . . . I think we have a very unique staff on our campus. We have a lot of people who are genuinely interested and genuinely concerned, and really want to do the best that we possibly can to help families. And I think our campus is unique in that way. I mean, we’re willing to work with each other and pull everybody’s weight along the way and we’re not afraid to do that. We’re not afraid to work together. (Building-Level Administrator, Cavazos Elementary, Mission ISD)

When individuals work together for the benefit of migrant children and families, the services offered are quite comprehensive. These particular school districts are no exception. Their ability to recognize family needs and mobilize school and community resources that can meet those needs has proven successful in these school districts.

Collaboration With Outside Agencies

Collaborating with outside agencies is yet another important factor in the process of creating and maintaining effective programs for migrant families. Through such collaboration, migrant and parent involvement personnel have been able to provide families with services that meet a family’s physical (clothes, shoes, etc.), educational (e.g., GED classes), and health-related (vaccinations, dental care, etc.) needs—these are needs that cannot be met by the school organization acting alone. By networking with other service organizations in the community, the schools we studied managed to successfully link these services in a comprehensive web that ensures, first and foremost, that a family’s needs are met. Often, satisfying the most basic immediate needs—such as clothes, shoes, blankets, and food—is the most pressing challenge for families. In these cases, school organizations usually network with religious institutions, philanthropic organizations (e.g., Salvation Army, Shriner’s, Jaycees), or disaster relief groups (e.g., Red Cross) who can provide families with immediate services:

López, Scribner, and Mabitivanichcha

Informant 1: In our church, we have a food bank and we have a clothing bank. So if there's kids here or families that need clothing, I refer them to go to my church, every Saturday from 10:00–11:00 a.m.

Informant 2: I also refer some [families] to the shoe bank. First Methodist Church . . . [does] fund raisers all year and they give the district, some 450 pairs of shoes to donate. Then, we divide them among the different campuses, depending on who needs them most. Then we set aside an emergency bank. Because we know that around this time migrants come back, and those are families that are . . . needy, we provide them with shoes. (Building-Level Administrator, Margo Elementary, Weslaco ISD)

At other times, the need may be more academic in nature. This is especially true in adult education classes offered by schools. In such cases, school organizations network with educational providers in the community (e.g., community colleges, universities) who offer GED courses and other relevant courses that the school district cannot provide due to limited resources. Many times, these types of academic (GED, ESL, etc.), vocational (sewing, cake decorating, floral arrangement, etc.), or counseling (self esteem, parent intervention training, etc.) classes are provided to parents at a free or reduced cost. These services are a result of genuine collaboration between two (or more) organizations that recognize parental need and agree to join efforts to address those needs:

Informant: So we started sewing classes and we have the Texas Agricultural Extension Service to help us in this effort. Are you aware of them?

Researcher: No, not really. Tell me a little bit about them.

Informant: They're through Texas A & M University. . . . [W]hat they do is they have a "trainer-of-trainers" session and they teach parents how to sew. And then their obligation is to go out and train at least 15 more [parents]. But these ladies have become, like really good, OK? They mainly sew undergarments—that's because we have a Levi-Strauss plant in McAllen. . . . Instead [of throwing away left over material], Levi-Strauss gives it to the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, and The Service calls in those trainer-of-trainers and gives them the material. So they, in turn, make underwear, jogging bras, nightgowns, shorts, those spandex, you know, biker shorts. I've got ladies that are earning \$50 to \$150 a week just by doing that alone. (District-Level Administrator, Individual Interview at District Offices, La Joya ISD)

In this particular case, Texas A & M University, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Levi-Strauss, and the La Joya Independent School District all agreed to work together in order to provide individuals with a means for economic self-improvement.

By planning effectively and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with different organizations in the community, these school districts have not only managed to increase services available to migrants, but, more importantly,

have provided a means for families to improve their economic needs. Because of this safety net, families are better able to focus their energies on raising their children and help them be successful in school.

Summary of Findings

What makes parental involvement programs successful in migrant-impacted schools and school districts? Our study suggests these schools were successful primarily because they focused their energies on meeting the multiple needs of migrant families above all other involvement considerations. In other words, these schools were successful because they made immense investments to provide families with the psychological support and physical resources necessary for success. Their ability to connect with families and identify their needs in a respectful and nonjudgmental way were critical components of the success of these programs. Likewise, the collaborative effort in meeting these parental needs was indispensable in working with a population whose needs are multifaceted and extremely challenging within the context of schooling.

In short, the individuals who work and interact with these families on a daily basis are not only highly aware of parental/family needs, but extremely committed to fulfill these needs by any means possible. Their commitment and dedication to the parents often extend from their own experience as migrants. Armed with such experiences, they negotiate the terrain of involvement by establishing a deep connection/relational bond with families through numerous home visits. They believed schools were responsible for initiating parental contact, and made an enormous effort (often relying on nontraditional strategies/means) to get parents involved in their children's education.

In addition, the adult education and training courses offered in these districts aimed not only to improve the economic and social capital of parents (through GED and ESL courses or through other vocational training), but also to generate an awareness of parental rights and responsibilities. The collaborative ethic involved in providing these educational courses was an important factor in effectively working with migrant populations. By networking with others to meet the diverse needs of migrant families, these schools have successfully demonstrated that collaboration can be an effective and promising tool to bolster student success.

Taken holistically, these findings provide a critical lens into the subtle and complex ways in which parental involvement is related to student success in these particular migrant-impacted schools and districts. It would be erroneous to assume, however, that this success was solely dependent on the parent-school relationships described herein. Certainly, our findings are in no way definitive. Rather, they provide a point of departure for discussion and reflection surrounding the factors that are conducive to fostering an organizational school climate that is focused on student success. As the data suggest, all schools in this study had a uniquely different understanding of

parental involvement, where school personnel deeply cared about meeting the multiple needs of migrant families above all other considerations. It is precisely this understanding, we argue, that make these schools and districts truly unique—for it provided the organizational capacity to enable migrant families to better focus on the education of their children rather than the social and economic pressures that permeate migrant life:

A lot of our parents literally feel like their social needs are more important: “I need clothing. I need food. I need my bills paid.” And what have you. And we help them as much as we can in some of those areas. But we [believe] there’s more to that. . . . It’s a very united community. There’s a community that’s pulling together and pulling resources to serve as support network for families. And to me, that’s why we’ve been successful [both] as a school and as a district. (Building-Level Administrator, Weslaco High School, Weslaco ISD)

The migrant kids that come here usually arrive in April. And when they finish up the [school] year, the first thing they ask is “When does summer school start?” Because they’re ready to come to summer school. And that tells you something. Let me tell you, one of the biggest compliments I get is from parents. The parents will say “You know, when we were up in the state of Oregon, our kids would always ask us ‘When are we going to Illinois? We want to go to Illinois.’” And to me, that says something. That means that kids want to be here and the parents *want* their kids to be here. So the kids and the parents have accepted the program. And whenever a kid actually looks forward to coming to school—to me, that means we’re doing something right. (Building-Level Administrator, Princeville Summer Migrant Program, Princeville CUSD)

I don’t [know] what parents do, but the fact is, by having the parents present, they had a big role in having those [test] scores raised. And that’s what we do for parental involvement. . . . We generate that awareness and we let them know that we care about their [children’s] education as much as they do. We tell parents “Everything else: the food, the clothes, the money. We’ll help you take care of that. What we need is for you to be there for your child.” To me, that’s what true collaboration is all about. (District Level Administrator, La Joya High School, La Joya ISD)

As will be discussed below, the next step is to use these findings as a springboard for future investigations and exploration of policy recommendations that will enable local educational leaders to improve their parental involvement programs in ways that can significantly impact the lives of migrant families.

Discussion

Through this study of exemplary school districts and effective schools, we have identified characteristics of parental involvement programs that result

in effective involvement practices for migrant populations. Pivotal to the discussion of findings is the need to rethink the traditional and familiar concept of parental involvement. We seek to expand the meaning of parental involvement and promote dynamic programs that encourage greater accountability to all parents, especially those traditionally marginalized parents, such as the migrant families we studied. Without question, this calls for a redefinition of parental involvement, a restructuring of parental education programs, as well as a refabrication of how services are coordinated to meet migrant family needs.

Redefining Parental Involvement

Familiar to us is the idea of “school involvement” on the part of parents. The literature is replete with such connotations. Yet, the idea of “home involvement” on the part of schools may appear less familiar. Nonetheless, in this study, a role that commonly characterizes all the schools and districts we visited is one of unlimited “home involvement.” Rather than perceiving themselves as organizations whose aim was to get parents into the school site, school personnel saw themselves as unrestrained agents who proactively go out into the homes, bringing the school to migrant families where they are. This commitment lies outside tasks and/or responsibilities that are narrowly defined by traditional job descriptions. Thus, the role of school staff is not defined by a commitment to a specific set of tasks but rather, by a commitment to a group of people, i.e., the migrant parents whom they serve.

In this regard, schools in this study were successful *not* because they subscribed to a particular definition of involvement, but because they held themselves accountable—first and foremost—to meet the multiple needs of migrant parents on a daily and ongoing basis. School personnel firmly believed they were primarily responsible for ensuring parental well being in the local community, and recognized that unless parental needs were met, any effort to enact routine or prescriptive “involvement” activities at the school site would reap less fruitful results. The extensive focus on families suggests school staff operated from a unique epistemological framework that was deeply rooted in accountability and commitment fueled by a common vision: that of promoting the educational success of migrant students through a concerted effort of meeting the multiple needs of migrant families.

This expanded definition of involvement has obvious implications for both policy and practice—especially for schools that are impacted by migrant students. In particular, these schools need to begin reconsidering the “traditional” role of school personnel, and offer professional staff development aimed specifically at identifying strategies and tactics that can be used to ameliorate the day-to-day challenges of migrant families in a more holistic fashion. The schools in this study were successful precisely because they hired individuals whose background and/or experiences were akin to the migrant way of life and/or demonstrated a clear potential for “going the extra mile” to help migrant families.

Reconstruction of Parent Education

Rather than providing materials and training for migrant parents to help their children at home, parent education in these effective programs was defined by two primary activities: (a) increasing parental awareness of school procedures and community resources; and (b) providing self-improvement training where parents can acquire skills that may help them secure jobs outside of agricultural work. In both of these activities, the concept of “parent education” was seen as an end in itself, rather than a means toward helping their children with their school work. This does not suggest that a parent’s direct involvement with their children’s homework is unimportant. Rather, these two activities extend beyond what seems obvious on the surface, and address the issue of involving parents in their children’s educational development at its very root. In focusing on the parents themselves and their educational needs (rather than attempting to “fix” parents to serve the educational needs of their children), these programs are, in fact, investing in the most essential source of human and environmental support for a child’s educational development.

In the past, the concept of parental education has reified a deficit perspective (Auerbach, 1989; Sigel & Laosa, 1983), suggesting that marginalized parents do not have the resources and/or education on how to properly raise and/or educate their children. In this regard, parent education has historically been seen as an intervention strategy to “teach” parents the necessary skills to provide a positive home environment that is conducive to learning.

Rather than subscribing to this deficit perspective however, schools in this study fully recognized the cultural and educational strengths of migrant families, but realized that parents may not have the social currency/capital to negotiate the unfamiliar terrain of the school and/or the social services available in the larger community. By facilitating this process, schools—in collaboration with community agencies and other educational institutions—were able to effectively fulfill the educational needs of parents without subscribing to this deficit mentality.

Restructuring the Delivery of Parental Involvement

At the micro level, effective migrant parental involvement practices reflect a true “collective effort” between schools and migrant parents. At the macro level, however, effective programs are commonly characterized by internal collaboration within the school system, as well as external collaboration with community and social service organizations to meet migrant family needs. The collaborative model ensures that schools are not doing it alone. This finding is reminiscent of the work of Dryfoos (1994), whose “full-service schools” model ensures that all children and families receive social, health and educational services in a more comprehensive and collaborative fashion.

If schools are to effectively meet the needs of migrant parents, they must first provide professional development that enhances school-community col-

laboration in ways that acknowledge these micro-level issues (such as including and honoring culturally relevant values, norms, and understandings of involvement), as well as macro-level issues (such as maximizing community resources to enhance the migrant family's lifestyle). Second, schools must take positive steps to establish a community-wide network of coordinated educational, social, health, psychological, and other related services which focus primarily on the entire well being of migrant families. Once these internal and external networks are established, parental needs will be met in a more holistic fashion and parents will have the opportunity to focus their energies on being involved in ways that make a real difference in the educational lives of their children.

Notes

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¹Because our funding source was primarily interested in identifying "best practices" for migrant students, researchers chose to limit their study to those schools and districts that had demonstrated academic success for this population. Although we recognize the limitations of this approach, we also believe this lens allows us to describe those practices that "work" in a more holistic and contextualized fashion.

²Readers should keep in mind the extraordinarily high dropout rate and low attendance rate of migrant populations when interpreting this selection criteria. When viewed against state and national averages, where conservative estimates suggest the migrant dropout rate is as high as 57% (Interstate Migrant Education Council, 1987), the schools selected for this study were truly exemplary in promoting the educational success of migrant students.

³This initial sample was selected from those districts identified as "exceptional" by the Texas Education Agency. All 15 schools were characterized by high concentrations of migrant students (50–80% of the total student body). Researchers chose only those schools where the migrant test-taking students attained at least a 70% passing rate on all areas of the TAAS.

⁴Migrant-receiving schools are schools in other states that receive migrant students from Texas-based schools.

⁵Because informants were selected by district-level personnel, problematic issues of representation are raised. We dealt with this issue by spending a significant amount of time in the field and by asking for subjects who could best represent the position of the school district with respect to parental involvement. School district personnel used their discretion to determine the individuals to be interviewed.

⁶Home visits have also been an important component in the work of Luis Moll (Moll, 1986, 1988, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, & Rivera, 1990), Norma González (González et al., 1993, 1995), and Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez, (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Their work has collectively identified "funds of knowledge" in Chicano/Latino households as a tremendous resource for teachers, who have used this knowledge to strengthen classroom instructional practices. These funds of knowledge provide another epistemic site for research and practice and are a rich resource for school change that have largely remained untapped in educational circles.

⁷Migrant recruiters are school paraprofessionals employed by the school district for the identification and recruitment of migrant students.

⁸The “red bag” was born through the efforts of state and regional personnel who sought a vehicle to transport student academic and health information from one school district to another in a timely and cost-efficient manner. Currently, parents are given training on what documents are needed to enroll their children in another school district as well as information surrounding appropriate/transferable courses. The information given to parents is placed in a red bag along with essential student documents. Parents are responsible for transporting the red bag to the receiving school(s) during the migrant season. As such, the red bag serves as a tool for appropriate student placement, as well as a means of empowering migrant parents to ensure the educational progress of their children.

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Redefining Involvement

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López, Scribner, and Mabitivanichcha

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