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ABSTRACT

Findings of a case study that investigated immigrant bilingual and English-speaking parents' views on education are presented in this paper. The study was undertaken to analyze the relationship between cultural knowledge and the parents' attitudes toward schooling. Participant observation and interviews were conducted with 3 teachers and 13 families in 2 elementary schools in a small town on the southern California coast. Eleven of the families were predominantly Spanish-speaking. Parent-teacher conferences were analyzed to illustrate the ways in which both participants constructed an understanding of a student's schooling experiences. Postconference interviews indicated that teachers and parents did not construct common understandings, and that the conferences were limited by time constraints and a lack of a common knowledge and language. Disparities in their understandings reflected gaps in cultural knowledge between parents and teachers. A holistic theoretical model is recommended as a way to promote two-way interchanges between teachers and parents that includes a systematic plan for teacher cultural education and parent orientation. Joint research teams are suggested as a means to investigate parent-teacher collaboration. One figure and two tables are included. (Contains 24 references.) (LMI)

Bilingual Parents' Perspectives on Home-School Linkages

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Bilingual Parents' Perspectives on Home-School Linkages

Teachers and educators, seeking ways for working with families, are particularly unsure about how to reach linguistic and ethnic minority families. The linguistic and cultural barriers to parent-teacher communication in bilingual and multicultural settings are myriad. These settings cause the most frustration and sense of failure for both parents and teachers (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Romo, 1984). Yet it is in these settings that we also hold out the most hope for increasing students' achievement and success in school via parent involvement in schooling. In recent years, researchers have recognized the importance of incorporating parents' perspectives in planning for parent involvement.

Cochran and Dean (1991) and Davies (1991) discuss the need to develop an understanding of the strengths and knowledge parents apply as they participate in their children's schooling. This understanding can then serve as a foundation for developing parent involvement programs and parent-teacher collaboration. Cochran and Dean (1991) also recommend defining what different participants mean by parent involvement and locating the meanings that are held in common. In addition, Delgado-Gaitan (1990) has suggested that the school needs to learn about families and then incorporate that knowledge into the class curriculum and communication with parents.

The following paper presents the results of a case study designed to investigate immigrant bilingual and English-speaking parents' views on education. The study was undertaken to analyze the

cultural knowledge that informed parents' attitudes towards schooling in a small community on the southern California coast. The larger study from which this paper is drawn examined parents' and teachers' differing expectations and understandings of home-school interactions. An earlier paper (Allexsaht-Snider, 1990) discussed teachers' perspectives on parent-teacher interactions in a bilingual setting. The present paper takes an in-depth look at parents' perspectives and analyzes a parent conference that illustrated the ways in which a parent and teacher constructed an understanding of a student's schooling experiences. The parent-teacher conference analysis also revealed disparities in understanding that reflected gaps in cultural knowledge between the parent and the teacher. In the conclusion to the paper, the relationship between parents' and teachers' cultural knowledge of schooling and implications for the development of parent-teacher collaboration in multicultural and bilingual settings are discussed.

Methodology

A case study method informed by an ethnographic research tradition provided the methodological framework for the study. A holistic approach to data collection and interpretation was taken; observations and interviews regarding parents' cultural values and knowledge of schooling were contextualized both in the immediate, local settings of the homes and classrooms and in the broader sociocultural contexts of the community and school (Spindler, 1982; Trueba, 1979). Parent-teacher and parent-child interactions were

considered in the context of prior socialization and schooling experiences, as well as in the context of the current school and community settings.

In order to discern repetitive patterns of behavior and communication, the observations and interviews were conducted repeatedly and regularly over the course of a year in both school and home contexts. Additionally, a comparative approach was utilized; three teachers and both English- and Spanish-speaking families in their classes were included in the study. A *reflective cross-cultural interviewing* technique (Fujita & Sano, 1988; Spindler & Spindler, 1987) was employed to uncover the meanings that parents attached to such key events as parent conferences and parent education activities. Videotapes of the key events were used as evocative stimuli for interviewing parents after the events to draw out their cultural knowledge about the interactions.

The interviews and participant observation with parents were designed to elicit a broad range of information about the funds of knowledge within the families (Moll & Greenberg, 1991). Specifically, the focus was on knowledge that parents considered to be relevant to their children's schooling. In keeping with a broad definition of literacy (Vasquez, 1989), the oral contexts for literacy development in the home as well as more conventional literacy activities focused on texts (such as reading and doing homework) were explored. Teachers were interested in knowing more about families' practices of traditional Mexican culture (e.g., holiday celebrations). They also wanted to know more regarding parents' attitudes and beliefs about learning English and about bilingual education. Both of these areas

were incorporated into the interviews and participant observation in the home and school settings.

In the following pages, a summary of parents' beliefs and cultural knowledge regarding their children's schooling is presented. This summary follows a description of the setting for the study and a brief introduction to the families.

Setting

The study was conducted with teachers, students, and parents in two elementary schools in a small town which I call Huerta. The school district served a population that was about 35% Hispanic, 40% of whom were limited English-proficient (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). The more than 2,000 students in the district were housed in six schools, four elementary, one junior high and one high school. Lincoln and Primavera Schools, where the study was conducted, had 3rd-6th grade classes on their campuses. Both schools had bilingual programs.

The three teachers who participated in the study were asked to recommend families from their classes to be interviewed, and then parents were sent a written invitation to participate. Thirteen families agreed to be interviewed and observed. The teachers were asked to suggest a variety of families for the study. We sought both families whose children were and those whose children were not experiencing difficulties, and parents who were frequently in contact with the school as well as those who communicated with the school less often.

Table 1 provides a summary of the employment and schooling backgrounds and family sizes for the thirteen families. Of the thirteen families, two were English-speaking only. Eleven of the families were

predominantly Spanish-speaking and had lived in the United States for from one to thirteen years after emigrating from México.

Parents' Cultural Knowledge for Participating in their Children's Schooling

A goal for the study was to develop a holistic view of families' cultural knowledge regarding their children's education. Therefore, families' knowledge of the school contexts for learning was examined in addition to the previously mentioned explorations of home contexts for literacy learning. Parents' cultural knowledge regarding schooling incorporated their own earlier experiences with schooling in México and included their current knowledge of specific curriculum and procedures in their child's classroom.

Spanish- and English speaking parents in the Huerta study drew on some common resources and areas of cultural knowledge. Those resources and the cultural knowledge informed their involvement with the school and their child's teacher. In the bilingual classroom settings that were studied, both English- and Spanish-speaking parents held common values about the importance of developing bilingualism in the United States today. Both sets of parents also drew on knowledge gained from older siblings' school experiences and their children's earlier schooling. They utilized these prior experiences as they interpreted communications and interactions with the children's present teachers.

Some of the differences in cultural knowledge between the English- and Spanish-speaking families were also evident when families talked about the way they used stories about their own

experiences in México. The Spanish-speaking families used these stories to motivate their children to study and learn in school in the United States. A summary of the different sources of cultural knowledge for participating in their children's schooling drawn upon by the thirteen families is provided in Table 2. A more detailed discussion of the parents' cultural knowledge is presented in the following sections.

Beliefs and Values

Schooling, bilingualism, and oral history. The Spanish-speaking parents spoke with a common voice about the reasons they saw for the importance of education in their children's lives. Those reasons parallel the traditional viewpoints of immigrants to the United States (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi,1986; Suarez-Orozco, 1987). Parents clearly saw schooling as a means for raising their children's economic and social status. In addition to their beliefs about schooling in general, the English-speaking parents as well as several Spanish-speaking parents spoke of the importance of bilingual education. The parents were proud of their children's development of bilingual skills and saw bilingualism as leading to broader career and employment opportunities. Mr. Espinoza said,

> *Para el futuro el español va a ser muy necesario. Se dice que nomas el ingles aquí, pero no es cierto. Hay muchas personas que hablan español y el gobierno necesita personas que hablan los dos idiomas.* [In the future, Spanish is going to be very important. They say it's only English here, but that's not true. There are a lot of people who speak Spanish and the government needs people who speak both languages.]

Mr. Miller, an English-speaking parent, spoke of the value he saw for his son in developing friendships with Spanish-speaking children at school. He added that he and his wife chose a bilingual program because,

> Well, you live in Southern California you should know Spanish. It's becoming more and more important to become bilingual. . . Our attitude towards this thing of bilingual education is we live in a world that has too little communication. We have to do everything to try to maximize good communication and if that means that more of us are learning to speak Spanish, the last thing we want to do is to say let's be obnoxiously monolingual. . . . I think it will help my neighbor learn English if I'm willing to learn Spanish.

The parents' attitudes and beliefs about education, and about the importance of bilingualism, were an important aspect of their cultural knowledge about schooling. They applied that knowledge as they took part in their children's learning at home and interacted with the school. Through oral storytelling and reminiscing, as well as day-to-day interactions, parents transmitted values and beliefs. Those values and beliefs indicated the instrumental role they saw for education in providing opportunities for economic and social advancement.

When asked about oral storytelling in their own childhood, the Mexican immigrant parents had many memories. They remembered experiences they had had with parents, grandparents, and other relatives who had told stories when they were children. In addition to children's fairy tales, a number of the parents had heard their family's oral recounting of the social and political history of México. The history of México in the early 1900s and during the Mexican Revolution came alive for them through these stories.

Some parents continued the oral storytelling with their own children. Several reported telling fairytales to their children when they were younger. Parents also told stories about their life in México, about their work, and about celebrations. In some cases, parents used stories about their earlier life, the hunger they experienced, and the lack of opportunity for schooling, to encourage and motivate the children about studying and doing well in school.

Crosscultural schooling comparisons. The most recent immigrant families used their knowledge of their children's performance in school in México to interpret, for themselves and for the children, new experiences in American schools. Mr. and Mrs. Reynoso talked about the fact that their son Javier was a very good student in México; he was very interested in school and in learning. They used this knowledge to reassure themselves (and Javier) that he would succeed in learning English. They enocuraged him by saying that he would eventually be more successful with his schoolwork in American schools. Mr. Henriquez used a similar approach with his daughter Reyna; he exhibited the report cards he had brought from México to show that she received good grades there. He asserted that once she learned more English, she would also get good grades in the United States.

In contrast to the other two families was Mrs. Castillo's explanation for her daughter Julieta's low achievement in the United States. Julieta was having trouble with memorizing the multiplication tables and performing other academic tasks in her fifth grade class. Mrs. Castillo suggested that her daughter Julieta's difficulties stemmed from the interrupted schooling she had experienced in a remote rural

school in México. There were long periods when a teacher was not available or the teacher did not come to class, and therefore the children's learning was sporadic. In Mrs. Castillo's words,

> *Ud. sabe, que en los ranchos a veces hay clases, y a veces los atienden y a veces no los atienden. Y en vez de ir para adelante, los niños van para atrás.* [You know that on the ranches, sometimes there are classes and sometimes they go to class and sometimes they don't. And instead of progressing, the students go backwards.]

Mrs. Sandoval made a similar observation about the differences between rural and urban schools in México. She pointed out that even though her husband had completed six years of schooling in a rural area, she considered her knowledge and educational level after only three years of urban schooling were roughly equivalent.

Parents used comparisons of schools and teachers in the United States and México to affirm their convictions that schools were better here. They believed that their children would have more opportunities to learn and progress in the United States. Mr. Reynoso drew clear distinctions, saying,

> *Pienso que todo está bien de la escuela. Nosotros estabamos acostumbrados a otra cosa. En México es muy diferente que aquí. Aquí son como veinte o treinta niños. Allá como cuarenta o cincuenta. Cuando ven a un niño estudioso, lo ponen adelante. Cuando lo ven mal, [lo ponen] atrás.* [I think that everything is fine with the school. We are accustomed to something else. In México it is very different from here. Here there are twenty or thirty students. There, it's forty or fifty. When they see a good student, they move them ahead. When they see a poor student, they put them back.]

He implied that teachers in México had no time for individual students' needs. If they were good students, they progressed; if they were poor students, they were simply moved back to repeat a grade.

Mrs. Castillo made a similar comparison that highlighted positive aspects of American schooling, saying:

> *[Aquí] tienen más atenciones. Allá casi no tienen. Y a mí, sí me gusta eso, que les pongan atención.* [Here they pay more attention. There there's almost none. And I like it that they pay attention.]

Home Context

Literacy resources in the home. Five of the eleven Spanish-speaking families had newspapers, magazines, books, encyclopedias, Bibles, and other texts in Spanish (and in some cases in English) in their homes. They read these texts and their children read them. One father reported that he had many more such resources at his home in México. Another five of the families had no texts in the home except the books, newsletters, and notes that the children brought home from school. In several of these cases, the teacher had suggested reading practice at home for homework. Parents were concerned that children did not remember to bring home a book from school. This was a problem because there were no books at home to read for homework. In one home, the father brought home the Spanish newspaper daily and had once purchased a Bible in Spanish. However, there were no other texts in the home outside of the children's school texts. Both English-speaking families had extensive adult and child libraries, in addition to newspapers, Bibles, magazines, and computers with text-like software. No clear patterns emerged regarding the relationship among the extent of textual literacy resources in the Spanish-speaking parents' homes, parents' schooling experience, and family tenure in the United States.

Both of the English-speaking families reported reading with their children regularly before bed, up through the ages of nine and ten at the time of the study. This contrasted with the Spanish-speaking families who tried to encourage their children to read on their own at the teachers' request. They reported reading with their children when they were younger and could not read themselves. Most of the Spanish-speaking parents, however, did not read with their children when they were older. Many of the families, both English- and Spanish-speaking, reported that their children were reluctant to read on their own.

Prior School Contacts

Children's earlier schooling and community experiences. Delgado-Gaitan (1990a) and Campos and Keatinge (1984) have described a unique Spanish-immersion preschool program in the Huerta School District. The preschool teacher, Mrs. Baca, engaged the parents actively as co-teachers of their children in the classroom and at home. She held monthly meetings with parents. At these meetings, parents were taught how to incorporate teaching and learning into their daily activities, such as cooking and shopping. In addition, Mrs. Baca established norms for communication and interaction with parents that made them feel welcome and needed in the daily curriculum of the classroom. Parents were encouraged to become involved in their children's learning at school and at home.

Seven families of the Spanish-speaking families interviewed for the present study had been in the United States for more than one or two years. Six of these families had participated in the Spanish

immersion preschool with their children. They felt that they had learned about helping their children to learn in the preschool with Mrs. Baca. Those early experiences had formed the basis of their knowledge for communicating with the teachers and the schools.

Parents also referred to their meetings and discussions with their children's bilingual primary school teachers. They used these references in giving evidence of their ongoing involvement with their children's schooling. Examples of earlier collaborative experiences working with teachers were cited to explain why they thought the present plans to work with the teacher and their child would be successful. Mr. Mendoza gave an example of an experience with his son's kindergarten teacher:

> *Guillermo es una persona que cuando quiere lo hace. El maestro Cintrón me dijo, "Sabes, yo no sé si lo vamos a meter a una clase especial. Así como está, no va a pasar el año." Le dije, "Vamos a trabajar juntos, Mr. Cintrón." Despues de dos meses le pregunte como iba Guillermo y me dijo, "¿Sabes qué? Me sorprendió. . . [Ahora está] igual que todos." Es muy jugueton, pero como le digo, cuando quiere, lo hace. Y es por eso que nos vamos a poner yo y la maestra a trabajar con él.* [Guillermo is a person who can do it when he wants to. Mr. Cintrón, his teacher, said to me, "Do you know what, I don't know if we're going to put him in a special class. The way he is now, he won't pass to the next grade." I said to him, "We're going to work together, Mr. Cintrón." After two months I asked him how Guillermo was doing and he said, "Do you know what? He surprised me . . . Now he's at the same level as the others." He's very playful, but like I said, when he wants to, he does it. And it's because of that that the teacher and I are going to work together with him.]

Teachers in the study had talked about earlier experiences with parents and schools that had influenced their current practices of parent involvement. In a similar way, parents relied on knowledge about schooling from past experiences in their present interactions

with teachers. They had gained this knowledge about schooling over the years of involvement with their children's education.

Classroom Context

Experience with the curriculum. Parents in each of the three classrooms demonstrated general knowledge of the class curriculum. They were aware of specific aspects of the curriculum that either their child or the teacher had brought to their attention. In some cases, the teacher had asked parents to work at home on extra reading, or on memorizing the multiplication tables, or on long division. In this way, the parents learned that these were aspects of the curriculum. One teacher was particularly interested in science. Her students had shared with their parents about the dinosaur study unit and science experiments they had conducted in class.

When asked about the class curriculum, parents most frequently said that they did not know very much. They said they had only a vague idea about what the children were learning. They also talked about not being knowledgeable about the curriculum content as their children advanced to higher grade levels. Mrs. Ureno discussed trying to teach her daughter Cristina at home. She was frustrated by not knowing enough about how children learn. In her words:

> *No sé mucho acerca de como se les enseña a los niños. Yo trato de enseñarles, pero es que uno ya tiene la mentalidad adulta y ellos tienen la mente de niños. Y eso se me hace dificil por que con la niña esta me hace que ella es lista para unas cosas y para otras no . . . Todavía no tiene muchas habilidades. Y a mí me desespera por que uno tiene una mente de adulto y piensa que los niños pueden aprender lo mismo, y no. Yo sé, pero a mi me desespera. Quien sabe, si yo hubiera sido maestra, a lo mejor hubiera aprendido más, pero no pude.* [I don't know very much about how to teach children. I try to

teach them, but I've got the mentality of an adult and they have the mind of children. And it's hard for me, because this child is ready for some things and not for others. She doesn't have a lot of skills yet. And I get frustrated because I have the mind of an adult and think that children can learn the same way, but no. I know, but I get frustrated. Who knows, if I had been a teacher, I would have learned more, but I couldn't.]

The Spanish-speaking parents were knowledgeable about the literacy and oral English curriculum their children were experiencing. For example, they knew whether or not their children were reading at school in Spanish or English or both. They also knew and articulated clearly the teachers' attitudes supporting the children's development and maintenance of biliteracy (literacy skills in both Spanish and English). The English-speaking parents each felt that their knowledge of the class curriculum was limited. Both Mr. and Mrs. Miller felt that they had known much more about their older daughter's curriculum than their son Seth's current classwork. When their daughter was going through the elementary schools, they had volunteered on a regular basis in the classrooms. Several of the Spanish-speaking mothers in the study also mentioned visiting and volunteering in their children's classes when the children were younger. They felt that these earlier opportunities had provided them with knowledge about how the school worked and what was taught, but since they were not currently volunteering in the school, they lacked detailed information about the curriculum.

Written communications from the school. Parents in two classrooms referred to written communications from the teacher (i.e., newsletters and parent letters). They felt that these written communications had informed them about the class curriculum and the teachers' expectations for parents and children in terms of

homework. In one classroom, parents said they were somewhat unclear about these messages because they were often printed only in English. They used their children and older siblings to interpret the letters, but were not sure that they were getting a complete and clear understanding of the teachers' messages.

Other parents saw a need for more frequent written communication in the form of grades and assessment of the children's performance. They compared the lack of this kind of communication in the United States with the monthly grade reports that had been sent home from school in México. The written communications from school in Huerta mainly served to inform parents of special events (evening meetings, holiday celebrations), school holidays, and classroom events such as field trips. Parents also referred to the written notes and correction marks that they saw on children's finished work. They were not sure, however, what these meant and how to interpret them.

Observation of English-as-a-second-language learning process. Parents placed a high value on their children developing bilingual literacy skills in both Spanish and English. The Spanish-speaking parents were, however, especially concerned about their children's English language development. They were aware of their children's oral, reading, and written skills in the second language and commented on the areas in which they thought the children needed to improve.

The parents of students whose English language skills were well developed were asked what contributed to the children's learning of

English. The responses were remarkably consistent. All acknowledged that the children had learned English in their classes at school. But they also placed significance on the more informal interactions their children had had recently and as young children in playing with native English speakers. Mr. and Mrs. Espinoza stated that their daughter Erminda's participation in Girls' Club activities for four years after school had aided her rapid and fluent acquisition of English. In addition to interactions with English-speaking peers, parents said that their children spoke English regularly with their school-age siblings. They saw the interactions with siblings as another opportunity for English language development.

Parents' concern over their own lack of English language skill to apply in assisting children with their homework was discussed in all the Spanish-speaking families. Mrs. Sandoval stated it succinctly, saying:

> *El único problema es que en el ingles yo casi no puedo ayudar.* [The only problem is that I can hardly help him at all in English.]

Her husband added,

> *Nosotros sabemos poco ingles y no podemos revisarle bien su tarea.* [We don't know much English and we can't check over his homework very well.]

Mrs. Orozco was frustrated because she could not assist her daughter. When Alicia was younger and received primary language instruction in Spanish, her mother was able to help her with homework. She said,

> *Ahorita ya se me hace más duro ayudarle porque ya casi todo está en ingles. Y nosotros no sabemos hablar ingles.* [Now it's much harder to help her because almost everything is in English. And we don't know how to speak English.]

The Spanish-speaking parents in this study saw their children's siblings and native English-speaking peers as providing the most significant assitance for English learning. The parents were consistent in viewing themselves as unable to provide much assistance with English language homework. A few had attended some English classes themselves and several expressed the desire to attend English classes when they had time. But all felt at a loss when trying to check on or assist with the work children brought home from school. Parents did though, define parent involvement in children's education broadly to ecompass the idea of *family* involvement. They encouraged their children to seek assistance form siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents when they felt constrained by a lack of knowledge of schooling or of English. Additionally, if parents were unable to attend evening activities with children or participate in daytime activities in the classroom, they sometimes sent older siblings or other relatives.

Parent Activities

Eight of the eleven Spanish-speaking families and one of the two English-speaking families reported attending parent education activities and parent group meetings on a regular basis. The four families who did not participate in these events stated that lack of transportation, work schedules, and family responsibilities interfered with their attendance.

The Huerta School District was the setting for a unique resource, in addition to the earlier mentioned immersion preschool. Many of the Spanish-speaking parents drew upon an unconventional parent group for learning about their children's schools. Spanish-

speaking parents who had been involved in the preschool program had gone on to form a parent group called COPLA (Comité de Padres Latinos [Latino Parent Committee]). (See Delgado-Gaitan, 1990a, for an in-depth presentation of the context for the formation of this group). Seven of the families in the study had attended COPLA meetings and found them a valuable source of knowledge about how the schools operated and how to communicate with their children's teachers. Four of the families had heard about the group but were not sure about its function. They cited heavy work schedules and evening English classes as obstacles to their participation in evening activities at the school.

The preceding discussion has illustrated the variety of sources of cultural knowledge regarding their children's schooling that parents in Huerta drew upon. At the start of this section, their beliefs about education and bilingualism were summarized. The role played by oral history accounts of past life experiences in México was also discussed. The comparisons parents made between schooling in México and the United States and the knowledge they had gained in participating in their children's earlier school experiences were highlighted. These past experiences significantly impacted parents' current attitudes and involvement with the schools. Parents had general knowledge about the curriculum in their children's classrooms, including homework policies and content. Knowledge of specific curriculum areas such as science or mathematics was brought to their attention by their children, or in some cases the teacher. A more comprehensive picture of the curriculum had been gained by several parents who had volunteered in their children's classrooms in the primary grades.

However, the children were all now in intermediate grades. The parents felt that they did not presently have the in-depth curriculum knowledge that they had gained earlier through volunteering.

The literacy resources in the thirteen homes observed varied considerably. There was an array of text resources in many homes. Several homes, however, had very few literacy resources beyond the school materials belonging to the children. Parents were knowledgeable about their children's English language development, and aware of resources outside the school, such as peers and siblings, who contributed to English learning. They were frustrated, though, about their own lack of English skills and inability to help with English homework. Two of the more important sources of cultural knowledge for many families were the parent education programs and Spanish parent group meetings. In the conclusion to the paper, I will discuss implications of the findings regarding parents' cultural knowledge of schooling, but first I will examine one parent's application of cultural knowledge of schooling in the parent-teacher conference setting.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Participant observation of the scheduled parent-teacher conferences held in November, 1990, yielded a rich data source for the study in Huerta. In each classroom, one conference was video- and audio-recorded and then played back for the teacher and parents in order to employ the reflective cross-cultural interview technique mentioned earlier in the methodology section. The parents and

teachers were interviewed concerning their explanations of the interactions in the conference activity.

Ms. Risotto's Conference with Mr. Sandoval

The conference held in Ms. Risotto's fourth grade class was with Mr. Sandoval concerning his son Jaime. Ms. Risotto had scheduled a series of conferences with Spanish-speaking parents on one of the two days set aside in the district for parent-teacher conferences. On these two days, students did not attend school and the teacher arranged to meet with as many parents as possible in consecutive twenty-minute time blocks. Ms. Risotto had arranged for a translator on the day she met with the Spanish-speaking families. She invited Mr. Sandoval to sit down in the child-sized chair on the opposite side of the table.

After a few pleasantries about the weather, Ms. Risotto moved the papers that were in front of her so that Mr. Sandoval could see them and began in Spanish, saying,

> *Tengo papeles (¿papeles, sí?) de la maestra de speech. ¿Entiende la reporte?* [I have papers (papers, right?) from the speech teacher. Do you understand the report?]

Mr. Sandoval responded, "*Sí*", and Ms. Risotto continued:

> *Porque el va a GATE entonces él tiene speech solamente one time a week (¿un día de semana?)* [He has speech only one day a week because he goes to Gate.]

In each case as Ms. Risotto searched for a word or phrase in Spanish, she looked over at Mr. Sandoval and he supplied the translation for her. As Ms. Risotto explained the program for speech, she asked rhetorically if he knew about what she was explaining. She added that Jaime had participated in the program before so she assumed he understood. He nodded "Yes." The first few minutes of the

conference were characterized by Ms. Risotto explaining the speech teacher's forms and asking for Mr. Sandoval's signature. He responded to her several questions about whether he already knew about and understood the information she was sharing with quiet, single word responses: "*Sí, está bien, mmmhmmm.* [Yes, it's fine, mmmhmmm.]"

Following Ms. Risotto's initiation and explanation of the topic of his son's special speech program, Mr. Sandoval took the floor. He confirmed that he recognized his son's speech problem, but also began to ask some questions, and gave the teacher information that he thought was important about the problem:

> *Sí, tiene el problemas con la "s" y la "z." Los demás no tienen este problema. Nada más él. Yo no sé porque...* [Yes, he has problems with the "s" and the "z." The others don't have this problem. Only he has it. I don't know why.]

The teacher explained that she thought the problem was possibly genetic, but that she did not think it was a serious problem and that the speech training was helping Jaime. Mr. Sandoval then added,

> *Yo pienso que es porque mi esposa fumó mucho. Pienso que es por eso.* [I think that it is because my wife smoked a lot. I think that this is the reason.]

Next, Mr. Sandoval asked if his son had the speech problem in both Spanish and English. The teacher answered yes, and again reassured him that she had not noticed it as a big problem. Then she tried to demonstrate with her own tongue and teeth the way in which Jaime seemed to mispronounce the sounds. Mr. Sandoval responded,

> *Yo le he dicho a él que hable bien ahora porque parece como un retrasdo mental.* [I have told him to speak the right way now because he sounds retarded.]

At this point he made sure that the teacher understood his message by asking the translator to "tell her." Then he added in English, " [I tell him] don't speak like that. Speak clear and perfect." Ms. Risotto was surprised by the statement about Jaime sounding mentally retarded. She reiterated an earlier point she had made about the fact that she saw the speech difficulty as a minor physical problem, and not something that Jaime had a great deal of control over. Mr. Sandoval laughed and nodded his understanding of her point. Then he asked,

> *¿Es él el único niño que tiene este problema?* [Is he the only one that has this problem?]

Ms. Risotto answered no, that there was one other girl, but she had moved. She added that in her last year's class she had had three children who had speech problems.

Analysis of the Parent-Teacher Conference

The preceding excerpts from the teacher and parent's dialogue illustrate the ways in which the two jointly constructed meaning about the difficulties Jaime was having with speech. Ms. Risotto began by presenting general information and asserting her assumption that Mr. Sandoval knew about the problem and the program. Her sense of confidence and ease about communicating with parents (in either Spanish or English), and particularly *listening* to parents, established a climate that allowed Mr. Sandoval to ask questions and provide her with information that he thought was important about his son. His questions revealed that Mr. Sandoval was not as informed about the problem as Ms. Risotto had assumed. And he was not so concerned with the program to help Jaime as he was concerned with

understanding the exact nature of the problem and how his son compared with other children.

Ms. Risotto used the questions Mr. Sandoval asked as a means for transmitting a school interpretation of Jaime's speech difficulties. She was not prepared for Mr. Sandoval's suggestion that his son sounded mentally retarded. His interpretive framework about disabilities contrasted sharply with her own. A later interview with the teacher revealed that she had also not understood Mr. Sandoval's explanation that he thought his wife's smoking had caused his son's speech problems. That statement had not been translated. Particularly in the area of learning and physical disabilities, parents and teachers operate within different interpretational frameworks. When those differences are compounded by cultural differences with immigrant parents and language barriers, the potential for misunderstanding is great.

A recent study (Harry-Belcher, 1990) of immigrant Puerto Rican parents discussing special education problems with their children's teachers, found that parents' interpretations of the school communications were often different than what the teachers intended. This was evident in the preceding vignette from Huerta. However, in this case, Mr. Sandoval felt comfortable about asking questions for clarification, and Ms. Risotto listened and responded to his concerns in a concrete way that was comprehensible. In this way, the development of a common understanding between the teacher and the parent was facilitated.

A close analysis of the above conversation between the teacher and the parent, though, demonstrates the complexity of

communication about issues such as children's disabilities and special school programs. The assumptions educators make about parents' understanding of terms and concepts, are evident in the interchange and the myriad opportunities for miscommunication. In the first few moments of the interchange, Ms. Risotto briefly mentioned Jaime's attendance at *GATE* (Gifted and Talented Education). In the conference setting, Mr. Sandoval was concerned with understanding the speech problem. But in the follow-up interview when he was asked to reflect on the conference, he asked fundamental questions about the Gifted and Talented program. All three of his children were involved in the program and he had been informed by school personnel about the testing process and placement in the program. However, he did not know what *GATE* stood for and how or why the children had been selected for this program. He was particularly confused by the fact that his son was participating in the speech program because of his difficulties, and was also involved in the program that was for children who were more advanced in their school work.

Delgado-Gaitan (1990a) pointed out in her earlier research with home-school communication, that both parents and teachers found twenty minute conferences to be extremely limited contexts for meaning making. In the cases where children had difficulties and parents were being asked to assist, the conferences were especially inadequate. The conference between Ms. Risotto and Mr. Sandoval was an example of the extent and complexity of communication that was attempted in the conference settings. The conference

demonstrated the limits imposed by a lack of time and a lack of common language and knowledge.

The parent-teacher conference between Ms. Risotto and Mr. Sandoval included two-way construction of meaning and Mr. Sandoval participated actively in the conversation. However, the follow-up interviews revealed several areas in which the teacher and parent did not construct common understandings. He did not understand clearly the teacher's message about his son's special educational problems and programs in speech and gifted and talented education. The teacher said she was not comfortable with and did not understand the parent's perspective on his son's disability. She was uncomfortable that Mr. Sandoval had made his son "sound retarded." Each held different bodies of cultural knowledge about these areas and a shared knowledge was only partially mediated in the twenty minute conference.

Implications for Educators and Families

A most important finding emerging from the Huerta study is a theoretical model of parent-teacher culture that is holistic. Figure 1 illustrates the the model. Parent-teacher collaboration and involvement is viewed as a process that is dynamically and jointly constructed by families and teachers. The model encompasses the idea that teachers and parents bring diverse bodies of cultural knowledge about schooling, learning, and working together to the school setting. These diverse bodies of knowledge contribute to the

construction of parent-teacher relations and parents' mediation of children's learning.

A holistic model of parent-teacher culture provides a useful framework to guide policy and program development, professional development, and research in the area of family-school collaboration. Program development in family-school collaboration is beginning to reflect the need for interactive communication between families and schools. (Davies, 1991). The holistic model developed in Huerta suggests that district and schools could implement policies and programs that foster interchange between parents and teachers in which parents could mediate the teachers' understanding of the families' cultures. On an individual basis, teachers in the study talked extensively about the need to know more about the families and their cultures. They also commented on what they had learned in settings like the parent conference discussed here. Individual teachers understood the potential for parents to serve as a source of cultural knowledge about the community. They also thought that more knowledge of the families and community would increase their effectiveness in working with families and students. However, the school culture did not explicitly promote this kind of two-way interchange between parents and teachers. Parent involvement activities were viewed as opportunities for educators to transmit knowledge of schooling practices to families. They were not generally conceived as two-way interchanges in which educators could learn about families.

Learning about the family context and values did occur for all three teachers who participated in the project, but this learning was

incidental. There were no formal mechanisms in place that encouraged or rewarded teachers for gaining this kind of knowledge. No policy existed that set expectations for teacher development in the area of cultural knowledge about families. A lack of formalized recognition of the need for teachers to learn about the families' cultures diminished the value of this kind of learning for the teachers. Inquiry-oriented professional development for teachers that provides resources and structures to assist them in learning about specific family and community contexts is needed. Additionally, teachers must be supported in applying what they learn from families to plan collaboratively with families for programs and activities that foster children's learning.

Parents and teachers in Huerta both spoke of the need to orient newly immigrated families to American schools and individual teacher's expectations for parent involvement in schooling and children's learning. They noted the role that the Spanish-speaking parent group (COPLA) had played in some cases in this regard. The COPLA group's orienting of new parents happened if by chance the families attended the meetings. Teachers also spent a great deal of time in their conferences with parents mediating parents' understanding of schooling and the classroom curriculum. A more systematic approach to the orientation of new parents could be established in the schools. This systematic orientation would not be dependent upon chance encounters and individual teacher's efforts. It could promote more rapid and effective collaboration between parents and teachers for the children that often had the greatest needs. The above provides an example of how teachers could take an inquiry-

oriented approach incorporating parents' perspectives and then collaboratively with parents design programs for children and families.

Future research on families and schools could build on the holistic, dynamic, and interactive model for parent-teacher culture that was developed in the present study. The research agenda in this area should incorporate a model for teacher research. Krasnow (1990) reports on a study of two teacher researcher teams who volunteered to help research teachers' views on increasing parent involvement in their schools. Team members interviewed their colleagues, and then "designed several projects intended to bring families and schools together in a collaborative effort to increase the children's school success" (p. 25).

Missing in Krasnow's study (1990) were critical elements that must be included if the interactive process model for parent involvement is adopted. The teacher research teams must have access to parents' perspectives on the processes they are investigating in order to maintain two-way communication and a holistic view of parent-teacher relations. The teachers' work needs to be informed by knowledge of the community's and families' beliefs and values. Therefore structures for interacting with parents need to be built into the research process.

The Huerta School District has a history of an active and viable parent-led Spanish-speaking parent group and two teachers who have participated in research on their own work with parents. It would seem to be an ideal location to initiate a project that not only included teachers as researchers, but also involved collaboration with parents in the research process. The joint teams could investigate

some of the following questions that were raised in the present study: (a) What are the aspects of school contexts that facilitate or inhibit collaborative work between parents and teachers in group settings such as parent-teacher groups or parent education activities? (b) What are the important areas of cultural knowledge about the school context to cover in orientations for new parents and what means can be devised to facilitate parents' access to that knowledge? (c) What are the important areas of cultural knowledge about families and communities that teachers need to incorporate into their work with families and what are the means and opportunities for accessing that knowledge? and (d) How can parents and teachers collaborate to establish norms that foster two-way communication between the home and school contexts that leads to teacher and parent empowerment, and ultimately to children's school success?

TABLE 1
Family Background Information

FAMILY NAME	NUMBER OF SIBLINGS IN HOUSEHOLD	PARENTS' SCHOOLING (GRADE COMPLETED)		PARENTS' EMPLOYMENT		YEARS IN THE USA
		Mother	Father	Mother	Father	
AGUIRRE	3	6th	6th	Fast food manager	Meat cutter	13
BERTERO	3	Community College	/	Hairdresser	(Parents divorced)	/
CASTILLO	3 *(5)	2nd	None	Unemployed	Nursery worker	1
ESPINOZA	2	Mexico -7th US - Community College	12th	Factory worker	Factory worker	5
GARCIA	3	6th	6th	Homemaker childcare	Nursery worker	3
HENRIQUEZ	1 *(4)	3rd	12th	Homemaker childcare	Car washer	1
MENDOZA	3	2nd	2nd	Factory worker	Nursery worker	11
MILLER	3	BA	Master's Degree	College student services worker	Librarian	/
OROZCO	2	6th	6th	Nursery worker	Nursery worker	12
REYNOSO	4	3rd	2nd	Housecleaner	Gardener	1
SANDOVAL	3	3rd	6th	Factory worker	Nursery worker	13
URENO	2	6th	6th	Hotel maid	Nursery worker	4
VALENCIA	3	6th and Social Work Training	12th	Homemaker T-shirt painter	House painter	4

* ( ) indicates number of siblings in Mexico

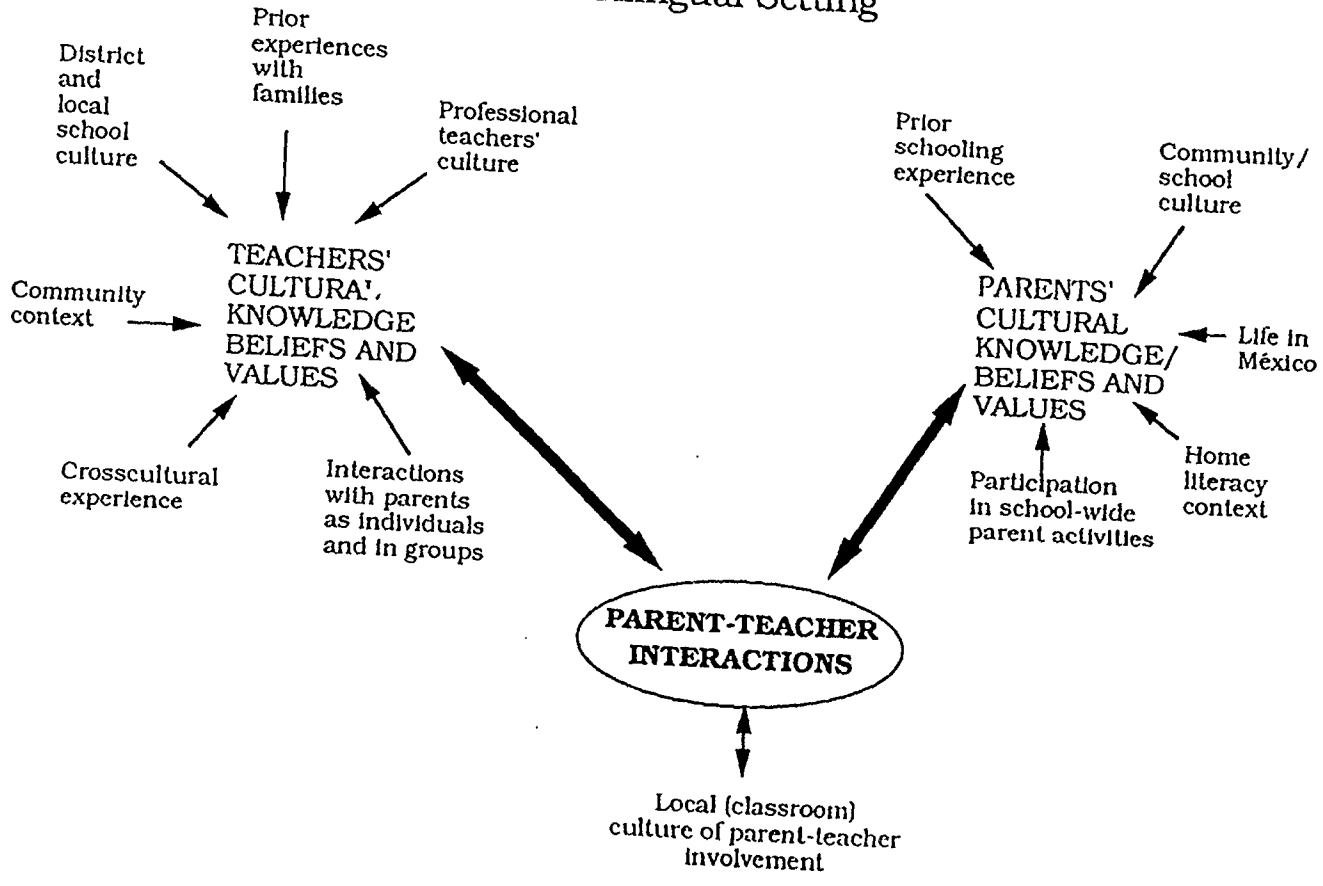
TABLE 2

Sources of Parents' Cultural Knowledge for Participating in their Children's Schooling

Beliefs and Values	About the instrumental role of education in socio-economic advancement About the value of bilingualism in American society
Life in México	Oral history Children's school performance Crosscultural comparisons with US schools
Home Context	Literacy resources
Prior School Contacts	Children's earlier schooling (preschool, primary grades) Older siblings' school experiences
Classroom Context	Written communications from school Observation of classroom curriculum Observation of English-as-a-second language learning process
Parent Activities	Parent education programs Participation in parent groups
Community Contacts	Community involvement (neighborhood, Girls' Club, sports leagues) Migrant education liason

FIGURE 1

The Construction of Parent Teacher Relations in a Bilingual Setting



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