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ABSTRACT

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Multifocal Educational Policy Research: Toward a Method for Enhancing Traditional Educational Policy Studies

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Abstract

This paper emerges from a perception of educational policy studies as restrained in its theoretical and methodological tools. It is argued that because most educational policy studies take place within a traditional rationalist frame, the findings of these studies do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the policy problems being researched and, thus, should not be used as a basis for making educational policy. In response to this problem, this paper describes a procedure for and demonstrates the utility of using more than one theoretical frame in educational policy research. To illustrate this process, traditional and critical policy theories and methods are used to examine and analyze the same issue--the relationship between parental involvement policy and the participation of Mexican-American mothers from a low-income community in their children's education. This bi-theoretical process, it is argued, reveals not only a fuller portrait but also the narrowness and constrictedness of each theory when used alone.

Multifocal Educational Policy Research: Toward a Method for Enhancing Traditional Educational Policy Studies

Policy studies has remained a narrow and under theorized area, relying upon functionalist, rational, and scientific models of operationalization and explanation. As part of the policy studies field, educational policy research has taken place primarily within a single traditionalistic paradigm.[1] Over time, therefore, educational policy studies has developed a group of taken for granted assumptions, norms, and traditions that institutionalize traditional ontological,[2] epistemological,[3] and methodological elements. A bounded set of research findings garnered through a confined and circumscribed grouping of theory and method is the result of this problematic condition.

There is a reason, though, for the lack of diversification in educational research and policy studies. This reason, I suggest, results in large part from the foundations upon which policy studies and its conventions are built. That is, the epistemological, ontological, and methodological tendencies of educational policy researchers have been historically and contextually shaped. The result of this shaping provides a general guide for examination and analysis of policy. Educational policy studies draws from the traditions of educational research, political science, and public administration, and each of these traditions are strongly influenced by positivism and to a lesser degree postpositivism (Nagel, 1984). Thus, the paradigm through which policy studies operates involves time-worn assumptions, norms, and traditions that have been institutionalized and thus are accepted by most researchers as the appropriate way to undertake educational policy research (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stanfield, 1994).

Over the past decade, a growing number of policy researchers have begun to interrogate the beliefs and practices associated with traditional research and its resulting policies. For example, Ball (1994) problematizes the rational approach associated with traditional policy research. Similarly, Rist (1994) critiques the traditional view of policy making as a deliberate process, undertaken by a known and bounded set of actors, who use research and reason to ensure the best possible policy outcomes. Stanfield (1985, 1993, 1994), Banks (1993, 1994), Gordon, Miller, and Rollock (1990), and Scheurich and Young (1997) have also problematized the traditional approach but on an epistemological level, arguing that the idea of knowledge and knowing which underlies educational research in general is racially biased. Additionally, Sirotnik and Oakes (1986) have noted the failure of educational researchers to

adequately explain, understand, and change educational practice and have argued that this failure is due to their conventional theoretical perspective.

This paper emerges, then, from my conviction that educational policy studies, as it is typically viewed, used, and reported, is restrained in its theoretical and methodological tools. Its limitations include a failure to critique rational decision making models that view policy problems as "natural;" a failure to provide a robust, dynamic, and multifaceted description of the policy context and problem; and a failure to enhance the role of research in policy making by presenting research findings in all their complexity while simultaneously striving to provide useful and applicable implications. Furthermore, traditional policy studies legitimate norms of behavior, according to which policy makers endeavor to regulate adherence and transform individuals who fail to "fit." It also fails to help us recognize or understand how policy reshapes the lived worlds of different populations or how it restructures contexts in ways that alter certain individuals' opportunities, capacities to act, and self-concepts (Forester, 1993). Moreover, traditional educational policy studies fails to recognize the ability of concepts and empirical research that feature alternative theoretical perspectives, such as feminism, postmodernism, and critical theory. These omissions lead to ignorance of issues that arise from these theoretical sources--issues that have the potential to strengthen the policy process.[4]

Through the research project reported in this paper, I developed a strategy for ameliorating several of these problems. Rather than continuing to follow a purblind path, I devised a procedure for and endeavored to demonstrate the utility of using more than one theoretical frame in educational policy research. This process involves: using the theoretical perspective and research methods of more than one theoretical frame or paradigm, analyzing and interpreting the data through the different frame, and comparing the similarities and differences in the findings that emerge from the different perspectives. This method involves a viewing from one lens and subsequently reconsidering the phenomena from another. The use of both traditional and alternate frames may help us better understand the effects of policy and policy discourse on individual lives, reveal inaccurate assumptions and, thus, question tenets formerly accepted as given and move discourse to a level of deeper understanding.

A Limited View of Parental Involvement

One area in which the problem just described has been played out is parental involvement. In recent years increased attention has been given to parental involvement by researchers as various groups have begun looking beyond the school grounds toward families and communities as resources for fostering academic success for all students. In particular, increased parental involvement has been heralded as one strategy for increasing the academic success of all children. Consequently, we have witnessed the development of many federal, state, and local initiatives aimed at promoting the development of school-family partnerships (Epstein, 1992; Harry, 1992). Researchers have also given more attention to what roles parents play in their children's education (Coleman, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990), why they are involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), and what constitutes parental involvement (Epstein, 1992; Scott-Jones, 1993). A review of this research provides what some might describe as a comprehensive picture of parental involvement. Indeed there is a general belief that the research base on parental involvement is comprehensive and trustworthy enough to provide guidance for policy. I disagree.

The available research is not comprehensive and, thus, should not be used as a basis for making broad-based educational policy concerning parental involvement. The research falls short in at least two areas: 1) the populations studied and 2) the theoretical perspectives and research methods used. Although the research project upon which this paper is based focuses on both of these limitations, this paper is concerned with the latter, the methods and theoretical perspectives used to conduct almost all research on parental involvement.

Parental involvement research projects are primarily quantitative or interpretative qualitative studies undertaken from a positivist or postpositivist purview. Thus, the methods, findings, literature, and programs concerned with parental involvement reflect rational decision making models and discourse. This discourse has created norms of behavior for parental involvement that primarily reflect an Anglo middle-class conceptualization of the parent and of involvement. Using this traditional parental model not only misrepresents the majority of parents in this country but also undermines the effectiveness of parental involvement policy by setting up expectations and assumptions based on an ideal type inaccessible for most parents. Additionally, given the limits of its own frame, traditional research is likely to overlook phenomena. That is, it may fail to make certain observations or to give voice to certain

perspectives. Policy, thus, would benefit from diversification.

In fact, parental involvement as an educational policy problem in the United States presents a unique opportunity to examine these issues. With the above described problem in mind, this research project sought to accomplish four tasks. The first task was to undertake a traditional policy study of the relationship between parental involvement policy and the involvement of Mexican-American mothers from low-income communities in their children's education. The second task was to understand how this relationship appears when reframed and explored through a critical ethnographic policy study perspective. The third task involved an analysis of the results of the two studies that illuminated the continuities and discontinuities between the two frames and provided a more holistic understanding of the parental involvement of Mexican-American mothers from low-income families. It is through these three tasks that the primary purpose of the study was achieved, to demonstrate the utility of using more than one theory or method in policy research. My point, thus, is that until we broaden our paradigmatic and theoretical purviews, our understanding of parental involvement (and other educational issues) will remain seriously incomplete.

Reframing Parental Involvement: A Multifocal Design

Qualitative research methodology as well as a traditional and a critical perspective were used in two stages of research to examine the relationship between parental involvement policy and the participation of Mexican-American mothers from a low income community in their children's education (Young, 1997). In the first stage, I utilized the methods and perspective most often used by traditional qualitative educational policy researchers. In this stage, I drew primarily from naturalistic inquiry, community studies, and case study methodology. The findings of this portion of the research were analyzed using methods that are considered unobtrusive, providing what is referred to as a realist account. In regards to theory, I borrowed from the broader policy studies field (e.g., implementation theory).

During the second stage of the study, I explored the school's parental involvement policy and the mothers' participation through the lens of a nontraditional researcher--a critical theorist--utilizing policy ethnography (Forester, 1985; Van Willigen & Dewalt, 1985). From the development of interview questions through the analysis of the data, I employed a version of critical theory that is concerned with social inequalities and the relationship between such inequalities and the conditions of communicative

action. In this form, critical theory integrates the micro and macro elements of research; that is, it seeks to provide an empirical account of the contextual and contingent reproduction--through policy[5]--of citizens' beliefs, values, and practices.

An elementary school in an urban area of Texas (Chavez elementary[6]) served as the primary research site in both studies. Each stage included interviews of staff and parents, observations of parent-staff encounters and general school life, and the collection of school, district, and other relevant documents.

The traditional and critical frameworks provided guidelines for the specific design, data collection, and interpretation within the two stages of research. Thus, the specific questions asked, observations made, and methods used during each of the stages differed according to the theory utilized. For example, the policy ethnography strategy relied more on observations and field notes than the traditional policy study.[7] However, each stage addressed the following broad concerns: the school's philosophy and mission in regard to parents and families, the nature and extent of parent-staff contact, the existence and nature of formal parental involvement programs, the existence and nature of informal parental involvement, and the resources allocated to parental involvement efforts.

Although the traditional and critical frames share some of the same post-positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions, they also differ in many areas. These similarities and differences are reflected in the findings of the research. In order to clearly delineate the continuities and discontinuities, I analyzed and synthesized findings from the traditional and critical studies separately and as a single data set, thus illuminating the similarities and differences.

Mexican-American Mothers and Parental Involvement Policy

In this section, I will illustrate the utility of a multifocal research approach. Excerpts taken from the study will be provided that demonstrate similarities and differences between the studies and thus the effect of theory and method on research findings (Young, 1997). This section opens with a presentation of findings regarding the relationship between school level parental involvement policy and the involvement of the mothers included in the study mediated through the traditional frame. This is followed by comparable findings from the critical research stage. The section closes with a brief discussion of the continuities and discontinuities between the two data sets.[8]

Participation and Parental Involvement Policy: Viewing with a Traditional Lens

As mentioned above, this section was excerpted from a more extensive text. My choice of pieces was based primarily upon the lessons they convey in regards to school policy development and implementation. The section flows from a description of the parental involvement policy to one of policy in practice and ends with a critique of the school's policy development and implementation.

Parental Involvement Policy

Formal school policy at Chavez is found in the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP). This document contains belief statements, mission statements, goals, an action plan, and a professional development plan. Both the school's mission statement and goals include parental involvement. The school's mission statement is written as follows: "The mission of Chavez Elementary, as an innovative, effective school, is to increase the academic and social growth of its students by providing a conducive learning environment and promoting parental involvement" (Chavez Elementary, 1996, p. 5). Further, of the three goals included in the CIP, one of them is concerned with having parents recognize the "value of their role in their children's social and academic growth" (Chavez Elementary, 1996, p. 6).

The CIP also provides a rationale for involving parents, strategies for doing so, and a means for evaluating progress. The rationale for involving parents is: "Students whose parents are actively involved in their social and academic growth experience more success" (Chavez Elementary, 1996, p. 13). The strategies identified to reach this goal include involving parents in the school's new dual language program (e.g., inviting parents to attend cultural celebrations at the school and providing students with opportunities to interact with and interview parents and other persons whose success in their careers depends on English/Spanish bilingualism) and in technology (e.g., providing evening computer classes for parents and/or students). Indicators of progress in regards to increasing parental involvement include: "Records of parent attendance and participation at school events" and "Parent Surveys." It is hoped that "By the end of the 1996-1997 school year, we will have documented participation in school events by 75% of our parents" (Chavez Elementary, 1996, p. 13).

According to the principal the focus on parental involvement has been part of the school's mission for years. "We keep parental involvement in there full-time. I think I'm largely responsible for it, cause I won't let it fall by the wayside, but we have a lot of good people that are also looking to get parents

involved." Unfortunately, none of the mothers or teachers I spoke to seemed to be familiar with the school's goal to increase parental involvement, and few were involved in either the dual language or technology programs.

Parental Involvement Practice

There was little evidence of efforts to implement the strategies listed in the CIP to increase parental involvement at the school. Teacher efforts and parent activities were not absent however; they simply did not reflect the CIP. When asked about a parental involvement program at the school, most teachers mentioned the following activities or events: Open house, after school classes, Family Math nights, Positive Parenting (a parent education class), the annual health fair, the PALs (tutoring) program, and the 6th grade banquet. It is these programs that were associated with parental involvement by teachers more often than either dual language or technology.

Furthermore, while both the dual language and technology programs require parents to come to the school and the evaluation criteria for demonstrating progress depends upon parent attendance at school events, most of the comments made by teachers indicate that teachers value less formal types of parental involvement. For example, many teacher efforts attempted to generate interactions between parents and their children in the home. One teacher commented:

> The most important thing is to give the children some time, quality time. Turn off the television set. . . . I think if they can do that at home every night for 30 minutes at least, we will see a big improvement. If they read with the children. . . . And discuss what they read, and talk about it, or just talk.

In fact, a number of teachers reported that they only invited parents to visit the school or their classroom when there was a program or activity. In addition, most teachers felt that it was more important for parents to spend "quality time" with their children.

Only one mother, a member of the school's campus advisory committee (CAC), was able to identify the school's written policy regarding parental involvement. She noted: "In the CIP they talk about increasing parental involvement and making the school more parent friendly." This mother was also able to provide other details. For instance, she knew that the computer classes were identified as resources for increasing parental involvement, and when I mentioned the dual language component, she chimed in

"oh yes, dual language. That is in there." However, she had never participated in either activity. Only one of the mothers mentioned having any contact with the dual language program, and another mother stated that she had been asked to attend a computer class.

Although not all the mothers were aware of the school's parental involvement policy, they seemed to agree that the school was trying to increase parental involvement, and each one was able to identify some sort of program with a parental involvement component. One mother recalled:

> I know we have Mega Skills for parents and they do that. We also have parents on the CAC. We have good parental representation this year. Six parents. Also the PTA that has parents involved. Parents come, and parents are on the executive board. I have been on the executive many times.

The realities of everyday life, however, made it difficult for some mothers to get as involved as they might like to be. For instance, one mother explained: "I would like to come up here more often, but child care is a problem. I just can't afford it. My husband is in construction and in the winter he sometimes can't work. So money is tight." Child care was, thus, frequently mentioned as a major barrier to involvement for mothers with children under age five.

Time was another barrier, particularly for the mothers who worked. Although the school had made efforts to work with parent schedules by holding meetings in the evenings and on weekends, mothers still found it difficult to attend activities in which their children were involved, not to mention making time for other school activities as well. "I like it when they combine things. That way I can get more things accomplished, like a PTA meeting with a performance or math night with computer classes." Commenting on the poor attendance at one school event, one mother said: "I think it is a sign of the time. Everybody is just stretching themselves too thin. Nobody has time. Nobody has time anymore."

Policy, Practice, and Implementation Theory

Parental involvement at Chavez was not initiated or implemented in such a way as to achieve the goal included in the CIP--increasing student achievement. To better understand the implementation of parental involvement at Chavez, I drew primarily from Michael Fullan's (1991) work on the change process. Fullan argues that in order to fully understand an educational change, we must understand both the big picture and the small. That is, if we are to understand the actions and reactions of relevant actors (e.g.,

parents, teachers, administrators), we must understand what the program or policy looks like from their point of view, and we need to examine this knowledge with an understanding of the educational change process.

Educational "*change is a process not an event*"(Fullan, 1991, p. 49; emphasis in original). It involves initiation, implementation, continuation, outcomes, and evaluation. Further, it takes place in an environment of complexity. It is important, then, that both the what of change and the how of change be clear and meaningful. Fullan states:

> It is possible to be crystal clear about what one wants and be totally inept at achieving it. Or to be skilled at managing change but empty-headed about what changes are most needed [sic]. To make matters more difficult we often do not know what we want. . . . The problem of meaning is one of how those involved in change can come to understand what it is that should change and how it can be best accomplished. (Fullan, 1991, p. 5)

At Chavez, people have different ideas about what parental involvement is and different priorities regarding the goals they are trying to reach. The only goal they hold in common is increasing parental involvement, but parental involvement is left undefined. Thus, different forms of parental involvement are being encouraged and practiced. School community members do not have a clear understanding of their responsibilities, and few base their actions on the school policy. The policy at Chavez is what Fullan (1991) refers to as a "Type III" change (p. 18). This sort of change is not "technically well developed or is not valued (by whatever reference group we use) [but it] is being put into practice" (p. 18). This type of change, even if valued highly, may not be developed enough to be either practically usable or to reach the goals specified by its developers.

These incongruities have resulted in inconsistency in parental involvement and frustration for some school community members. One teacher commented:

> It's been difficult, you know. And we'll have a lot of things, activities that hardly anyone shows up. It's just, it's inconsistent. There's no constant way that you always see things happening. . . . Sometimes you're just thinking, "Well, when are they going to, when are some of the parents going to come and meet us that half way?" I mean, I know that, I know teachers and people who have gone beyond that halfway mark, I mean way beyond, and they still don't get a response. You know, it's like how. It can get frustrating. . . . Last year we had so many

activities planned for parents, and the response was not very good. And it was just like "Gosh what else can we do?" You know?

According to Fullan (1991) the problem here is that "unclear and unspecified changes can cause great anxiety, and frustration to those sincerely trying to implement them" (p. 70).

Further, it seems that mixed messages have been circulated, primarily by the principal, in regards to: the role parents are to play in the school, the importance of the goal to increase parental involvement in relation to other school goals, and the adequacy of present involvement activities and efforts. These mixed messages increase confusion and frustration. For example, two of the mothers in this study echoed the above teacher's comments on low parental participation. One even said "it is very frustrating. I don't know how to get more parents up here." However, a few moments later the same mother said "But, then [the principal] thinks we're doing pretty good, I think. He said something like that the other night." This mother is referring to the comments that the principal typically makes at meetings and events where there is large parent attendance. His comments generally applaud parental involvement efforts and/or encourage parents to stay involved. At other times, however, his comments indicated that he feels parental involvement is too low.

Congruency between policy and practice has several advantages. First, people know what to expect and what is expected of them--there is less confusion. Second, when people are aware of expectations and their responsibilities, their practice is often more effective. Third, this knowledge also helps to ensure that everyone is working together toward a common goal. For example, if increasing student success is the goal, then everyone in the school and parent community should be aware of this goal. Further, strategies, practices, and responsibilities should be congruent with this goal.

Creating a vision. According to Miles (1987) vision building involves creating a shared idea of what a program should look like. "It provides direction and driving power for change, and criteria for steering and choosing" (Miles, 1987, p. 12). The lack of clear vision regarding parental involvement at Chavez makes it difficult for the school staff to understand what they need to be doing. Prolix and/or diffuse goals as well as poorly or undelineated implementation steps present major problems at the implementation stage. Those who are expected to implement the change "find that the change is simply not very clear as to what it means in practice" (Fullan, 1991, p. 70). There is no common understanding of

either what parental involvement is or what they want it to look like in practice at Chavez. The only common theme heard among school personnel is "we need to increase parental involvement." This is a problem for implementation of any policy.

Chavez personnel have made attempts to involve parents for many years, and recently they have increased their efforts to involve parents by adding parental involvement components to their dual language and technology programs. However, it does not appear that a lot of thought and reflection were put into developing a comprehensive parental involvement program. Fullan (1991) argues that changes that are implemented without a great deal of thought being put into the vision behind the change are often interpreted in an oversimplified manner. Such changes often fail due to a sense of "false clarity" (Fullan, 1991, p. 70). False clarity occurs when school personnel think they have implemented a program or policy when actually they have only assimilated superficial trappings.

A final problem with the parental involvement program at Chavez is that the program was not developed by the school community. Rather, aspects of the district and state programs were reviewed and combined with two other programs (dual language and technology) by members of the CAC. Little effort was put into developing a program that was situation specific or that included the views and needs of members of the Chavez school community. According to Fullan (1991), those who will be involved in the implementation of an innovation must work out the meaning of that change together.

Establishing need. There appears to be no identified need for parental involvement at Chavez. Although, the program has been identified with student achievement, the link is tangential at best. Even if school personnel understood what they needed to be doing and why, it is difficult to give up time and energy to implement a policy for which one cannot identify a need. The lack of an identified need becomes even more problematic when the policy in question is merely one of many being implemented (Fullan, 1991). Chavez has a large number of programs that have been implemented in recent years. Thus, even if school personnel feel parental involvement is needed, they may not feel it is needed as much as something else. They may, as a result, be less willing to shift their energies.

As indicated above, the school's CIP states that the goal of parental involvement is increasing student achievement. Furthermore, increasing student achievement is viewed as a need at Chavez--a need that is being addressed by a number of programs. Increasing student achievement could, however,

become the "need" for parental involvement if the research on parental involvement becomes known to and understood by school personnel.

Research has found that the more involved a parent is in the education of his or her children, the greater the impact on the child's educational achievement. Several members of the school staff noted this. The parent specialist stated: "you know, research still tells us that the parent is still up there in terms of the most influence. . . . Research says as a fact that parents have an impact." However, beyond this basic relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, there was very little knowledge of the parental involvement literature. This is a problem, because if one is focusing on increasing student achievement, one must understand what forms of involvement are most likely to do that. Otherwise efforts will be made but success, increasing student achievement, is unlikely.

Determining activities and responsibilities. The final area in which shortcomings are evident is determining activities and responsibilities. After a need has been established, activities must be designed that achieve the specified goal, and responsibilities must be identified for all relevant personnel. The findings of this study, however, indicate that very few teachers had any specific responsibilities and that a large number of unfocused activities were being used to involve parents. Further, these activities were not implemented in any systematic way. If teachers and other school personnel are given clear responsibilities that are aligned with an agreed upon vision, efforts are likely to be more systematic and more effective (Fullan, 1991).

Furthermore the activities that are identified must be practical. Practical activities are those that address identified needs, that fit well with the teachers' work, that are focused, and that include concrete how-to-do-it directions. Further, these activities must be adaptable. No two parents are the same, just as no two teachers, principals, schools, or communities are the same. It would be difficult, perhaps even futile, to regulate exactly how to involve parents. One teacher commented: "The strategies vary with the group of people that come in each year." Another teacher said that: "Each one of us has our own way of trying to get parents up here." Consequently, a range of activities must be available.

It is likely that some of the practices currently being used may address goals that are specified for parental involvement; however, some may be less productive or meaningful than others. School

personnel need to evaluate what they have been doing and determine what ends they address. Then they must prioritize.

In sum, parental involvement at Chavez was not initiated or implemented in such a way as to achieve the goal of increasing student achievement. Shortcomings were found in the following areas: Creating a vision, establishing need, and identifying activities, resources, and responsibilities. However, the more factors that are in place in supporting implementation, the more likely a change will be effectively implemented (Fullan, 1991). The members of the Chavez school community need to concentrate on putting in place as many of the factors discussed above as possible if they wish to have a successful parental involvement program. Although undertaking these activities will not guarantee a successful program, they should facilitate the development of a better articulated, more focused, and perhaps more successful program than the one currently in place.

Participation and Parental Involvement Policy: Reviewing with a Critical Lens

"Reviewing with a critical lens" provided quite a different story of parental involvement policy and practice at Chavez. Whereas in the first stage of the research, my main concern was understanding what the school's policy was and how that related to parental involvement practice, in the second stage of research my focus went beyond these issues. For example, I wanted to understand the effect of societal inequalities on relationships of involvement. Similarly, I explored how policy shapes and is shaped by beliefs, values, and practices.

As was the case in the previous section, the findings reported hereafter constitute a portion of a larger group of findings (Young, 1997). The original text provided among other things detailed accounts of the mothers' involvement and a description of the school and community social and historical context.[9] Within this section, I have included a brief description of the policy development and factors affecting parent involvement in practice. Following this description, I demonstrate how the critical frame illuminates the importance of power in parental involvement at the school.

Parental Involvement Policy

The formal school policy on parental involvement at Chavez was developed several months before I began my study. According to the principal, the school's Campus Advisory Council (CAC), which is made

up of parents and school staff, was responsible for the development of a Campus Improvement Plan (CIP). That plan included the following mission statement: "to increase the academic and social growth of its students by providing a conducive learning environment and promoting parental involvement" (Chavez Elementary, 1996, p. 5). According to several teachers and the principal, this is not the first time parental involvement has been part of the school's mission. One teacher noted:

> It's been on there before. Yeah. CIPs in the past, they weren't called CIPs, but whatever they were. . . . I've seen it go through these little cycles of "We think everything ought to be geared toward parental involvement," and then we'll go for a few years where we think "Well, no, that didn't work. We need to focus somewhere else." And now we're back to: "parental involvement's got to be real important."

The message "parental involvement is important," is emanating from multiple sources. The school district office, the state education agency, the Department of Education, educator trade magazines, and educational research journals, among others, are placing increased emphasis on parental involvement. Many schools, as a result, are adding parental involvement to their agendas for school improvement. Further, many supporters of parental involvement, like those at Chavez, are linking it with student achievement. Spear heading the movement at this school is the principal. He has placed parental involvement, along with dual language and technology, as a "priority" in the school's CIP.

It is difficult, however, to perceive parental involvement as a "priority" at Chavez for several reasons. First, on several occasions the principal indicated that his interest in parental involvement was cursory. That is, he included it as part of his school's mission because it was expected by district leaders. He stated that his "primary focus this year is dual language"--a program that brought large sums of money into the school. The principal never clearly articulated a reason for supporting parental involvement, and his actions (which are described below) failed to support parental involvement as well. Second, while the signatures of both parents and school staff can be found in the CIP, indicating their involvement in the development of the document as well as their approval of its contents, the actual document (which resembles the document from the previous year) was (re)written by a few school staff members (i.e., the principal, vice principal, and one or two teachers). The finished document was distributed to all CAC members and teachers; however, few members of the school community appear to have much familiarity with the document. The following comment by one teacher is illustrative:

> I don't particularly see a program or policy. I don't think we've ever had one. When we tried one year to put parental involvement as the main focus. . . what it was was extra paper work. We kept track of the parents who came in, and just wrote down what they came in for, wrote on a log sheet, but then at the end of the year, no one asked for them.

The above quotations reveal several things. First, the CIP is not recognized as a serious reference of school policy upon which members of the school community base their practice. Second, when parental involvement is included, excluded, and included again in school policy it takes on an air of superficiality. It comes to be associated with other programs that appear and disappear over time, due to their popularity in educational discourse rather than to their educational importance. Parental involvement, as a school-wide program then, comes to be viewed as an add-on or extra work, and under these circumstances, it is difficult for the parental role to be considered an integral part of the education process.

When asked about the involvement activities supported by the school, both teachers and parents tended to respond by naming programs in which parents are involved. Some of these programs reflected school policy, and some went beyond it. For example one teacher stated:

> We have many programs that involve parents. We have the CAC, dual language. That is a new one. We have the school banking program. Has anyone told you about that? Mothers are the tellers--every, I think, Friday--for the kids. And the money goes into a real savings account for them. Also the principal has breakfasts with the parents to talk about things, and parents will eat with their children sometimes in the mornings. You see parents there a lot for that.

Another teacher commented:

> The parents are holding a graduation ceremony for the 6th graders. They are really involved in that. They are having a banquet and speakers and something else [pause]. Also parents work on the yearbook. They come to things like performances and PTA meetings. Parents come to parent teacher conferences. They helped out with track and field, and a few are on the CAC. They are really all over the place.

One teacher, who is a member of the CAC, stated: "In the CIP they are just talking about having parents coming out to evening things. It doesn't include all the levels [of parental involvement]." Thus, school level policy appears to have an additional problem: it does not include the types of involvement that are

most likely to occur. This may help to further explain why so few individuals at Chavez knew anything about the school policy.

The mothers included in this study were not involved in the activities listed in the formal policy (dual language and technology). Rather, the activities in which they were involved are as diverse as the activities noted by the school staff. Thus, the involvement of the four mothers in their children's education better reflects the informal ideas and practices associated with parental involvement than the formal policy included in the CIP.

Parental Involvement Policy in Practice

Policy is, according to Dunn (1994), whatever a governing body decides to do or not to do. A policy does not even have to be written. School personnel at Chavez elementary school have many different ideas about what parental involvement is, how it should be practiced, and how it should be increased. Their practices, which appear to be based on these ideas, include activities that move beyond their formal school level policy. They are part of the informal parental involvement policy or simply "the way we do things around here." The way in which this informal policy was described and practiced can be broken into three categories: involving parents in their children's education, involving parents in the school, and involving parents in decision making. The following three vignettes, taken from my field notes, illustrate the categories:

Vignette one: Parent involvement in their children's education. *The cafeteria is teeming with children and adults. Tables have been set up in a U shape in the center of the room and covered with colorful paper. Americorp members are seated at spaced intervals teaching children and their parents how to play different math games. The math games are created from ordinary household items, such as paper, cardboard toilet paper tubes, egg cartons, and beans. Each family will leave the school this evening with a kit containing materials for all the games. Parents will also leave with directions on how to make additional game pieces and an understanding of how to play the games with their children and what math skills the games target.*

At one table a young mother sits with her son, silently observing as he plays "the math corral," a game that teaches addition, subtraction, and number patterns. The boy stared intently at the horses before he attempted to answer. Each time he answered correctly, his mother smiled and stroked his hair.

Vignette two: Parent involvement in school. *The Chavez band and orchestra are putting on an end of the year concert. The young musicians, their instructors, and attendees assemble in the school's cafetorium, a large room filled with child-sized cafeteria tables and fashioned with a stage at one end. The walls of the cafetorium are covered with giant Aztec masks made by the children in their art classes and several motivational banners. One of the banners mentions parental involvement. It states: "Chavez Elementary. The One Above the Rest. A School where children learn in an environment conducive to parental involvement for the purpose of increasing the academic and social growth of its students."*

Parents and family members make up about 25% of the crowd. The remainder are students, school staff, and several school adopters. As the band and orchestra members take their places, their eyes searched the crowd. Faces light up with smiles and embarrassed grins as parents, grandparents, and siblings are located. Several children wave quickly.

One mother, who is seated near me, holds a toddler on her lap, helping him wave to his older brother in the band. She exclaims "look at your brother, mi hijo (my son). He is so handsome. Such a man. Yes. Look at your talented brother." The little boy looks toward the stage and then back at his mother, smiles, and then kicks his feet.

The crowd applauds enthusiastically between pieces and family members exchange comments. The last song played is "Des Colores" and the audience is invited to sing along. Voices fill the room. The mother with the toddler continues to sing the song to him as they make their way up to the stage. Once there she pats her older son on the back and then gives him a hug.

Vignette three: Parent involvement in decision making. *The campus advisory council (CAC) is starting a bit late. The principal sits down between his secretary and the vice principal and is chatting with them as other members continue to enter the room and find a seat. The room is becoming*

very crowded as more members arrive. Four parents are here today, two men and two women. The women are sitting near the parent coordinator.

The vice principal begins the meeting with greetings and then refers to agenda item one, the selection of two CAC co-chairs. She turns to one of the fathers and asks him if he will do it. He declines but nominates the other father sitting next to him. This father accepts. The vice principal then discovers that she can serve as co-chair. The principal smiles and then turns to the father and says: "You'll be working closely with me, and we don't always have to wait for a meeting to made decisions." To the rest of the council he says: "But I will let you know before I make any final decisions."

The mothers continue to sit in silence as announcements are made. The dual language director describes a grant she is working on regarding family literacy. One of the fathers announces a trip for parents and school personnel to Laredo. He reminds the group of how much fun they had four years ago when they went. The principal discusses plans and needs for the upcoming honor roll assembly. One of the mothers has made several entries in her calendar.

Both school-wide and individual teacher efforts have been focused on increasing parental involvement within these categories--categories which comprise parental involvement "on school terms."[10] One could interpret these examples as proof of a thriving parental involvement program. Upon critical examination, one finds a number of shortcomings with these categories of involvement. For example, parents are not involved in the planning of any of these activities.

Formal planning for parental involvement is undertaken primarily by the parent involvement correlate, the parent specialist, and the school principal. Other school personnel who are infrequently or informally involved in planning for parental involvement include the technology teacher, the dual language program director, teachers, and Americorp volunteers. Interestingly, very few formal parental involvement activities are planned by either teachers or parents. Americorp members plan and run family math nights; musical concerts are planned by the choir and band directors and school administrators; and CAC meetings are planned by school administrators. The only parental activities that teachers consistently have influence over are activities that they send home with their students. Similarly, the only school-based activities planned by parents are associated with the PTA. Parents are not members of the parental involvement correlate. Parents are not involved in setting times for school governance meetings or other

events. According to one teacher, parents have little voice in what goes on concerning parental involvement or what happens in the school at large.

Omitting parents from the planning process is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates the symbolic nature of parental involvement and reinforces the image of parental involvement as an add-on program. Second, the planning and policy making process involves the allocation of values (Marshall & Scribner, 1991). Thus, the lack of involvement of parents from the school community in these processes generally excludes the values of the families the policy and plans will effect, and it seriously limits the values that are allocated. As a result, when school staff members discuss parents and parental involvement and then make policy and plans, they are putting into play their value systems, constructing a particular definition of parental involvement, and reifying their definition as the accepted norm (Young, 1995). Similarly, school personnel are not able to see or experience parental involvement from the perspective of Chavez parents. Thus, certain activities or expectations may be planned that cause increased stress in the home context. Further, because mothers are primarily in charge of their children's education, the impact will be far greater on them. An additional reason is that when mothers are not included in planning for parental involvement in education, then their ideas regarding parental involvement and education are not included in that planning. To illustrate, Tina described what she believed an educated person to be:

> Una persona bien educada. . . . This means a well-educated person, which is someone who has more than school information. This is someone who is also educated in life. You know? I mean a person who can work and live with others and respect his elders. Show respect. That is what I am trying to teach my children. See, education is more than school.

Such understandings of what counts as education or being involved in educating one's children is unlikely to be included in school parental involvement planning if this mother or others with similar ideas are not brought into the planning process.

Observations of participation patterns at Chavez have led some to comment on the low level of overall participation. One interviewee said: "there isn't much parental involvement. I can't think of an instance when I witnessed a parent volunteer working in a classroom with the children or shelving books in the library. I can't even say who is PTA president this year." Further, one teacher asserted that parents had very little impact on the school. She said:

> I think the impact parents have on the school is minimal. They aren't really involved. So how can they affect anything? I mean, somebody, and I'm not sure if it's the. . . parent specialist, or if it's those parents who choose the fund-raisers for the PTA. . . . That's some effect on the school, I think. Then they choose how that money's going to be spent. Last year they bought the marquis in front of the building.

The findings of this study indicate that the level of participation at and impact on the school is related to a number of factors. These factors include parent experiences, status inequalities, social norms, expectations, and power. In the following, section I discuss how relationships of power affect parental involvement at Chavez.

Policy and Practice: Issues of Power

The issues of power and authority are important to an understanding of the home-school relationship, particularly when there are education level, social class, and ethnic differences between the school staff and community. The findings of this study suggest that parental actions and influence are mediated by attributes such as gender, social class, education level, and culture (Young, 1997). It is also evident that parent actions are affected by power.

Power. In situations where inequality exists, the actions of dominant group members and the response of those from subordinated groups may be seen as a function of power relationships. There are numerous conceptualizations of power. Traditionally, power has been understood in terms of who participates, who gains and who prevails. Moorhead and Griffen (1992) define power as the potential ability of a group or individual to influence others, to control others, or to impose one's will on others. Lukes (1974) expanded such notions of power to include a third dimension: "power not only limits action it also shapes the conceptions of the powerless about their inequalities (p. 38). He refers to this as a radical view of power. Further, according to critical theorists power is reproduced and/or maintained through the status quo, the existing order supported by norms over time. That is, the way things are done and thought about are determined by how things are already done and what is already expected.

For the purpose of this paper, power is viewed primarily in terms of the ability to define reality and to maintain this view of reality through mechanisms such as status quo norms and expectations. In this form

power can work to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless, to control agendas, to stifle action, to prevent the voicing of grievances, and to prevent the recognition of certain interests (Gaventa, 1980).

In educational institutions, power is invested in the position of the school leader, the principal. Over time, the two, power and the principal, have become interrelated and associated. Thus, the principal is typically viewed as the most powerful person in a school. This is the case at Chavez. In fact, the school district recently reinforced the power of the principalship by changing the title of the school governance committee (and the roles of its members) from a campus decision making team to a campus advisory council. No longer are parents and teachers expected to act as a team, with the principal, making decisions; rather their role is now advisory. To ensure that members of these "councils" understood their demoted status, the district provided training for all CAC members one Saturday morning at a local high school. Three of the parents, who are members of the CAC, attended the training. The session leader made very clear what role members of the CAC would play in school decision making. In fact, within the first 30 minutes of the training, the session leader had participants repeating the following statement to their neighbors: "your role is to advise not to make policy." Soon thereafter a video was shown. It highlighted the "advisory" role and discouraged the "telling what to do" role. According to the principal, the name of the school council had recently been changed from Campus Leadership Team to Campus Advisory Council because many parents were overstepping their role. He stated:

> It is now an advisory council rather than a leadership team. Under the old system more members were trying to get more autonomy and make decisions that were really beyond the scope of their roles. So the district developed a manual and set the parameters. Leadership in the district realized that "advisory" needed to be pointed out that it isn't a decision making team but an advisory council.

When asked whether parents at his school had ever tried to "get more autonomy" or "make decisions that were really beyond the scope of their roles," he said that it had, but he was unable to provide any specific examples. Instead he changed the subject and described how "his parents" typically agreed with him on most issues.

Reproduction of the status quo manifests itself at the microlevel. Those in power set up expectations with subordinates and organizational norms. One expectation held by many teachers at

Chavez is: no matter how much work you put into designing a decision or activity, the administration may change things without consulting you first. One teacher provided an example. She said:

> Last year, we were planning Back to School Night. . . . we chose dates and we set times, and all of us. . . had some pretty strong opinions about when it should be and when it shouldn't be, and how long it should last, and how much time it would be nice to have parents in the classroom. So we made all these decisions, and then the next day we got something from the principal saying that... when the Back to School Night was going to be, which was not any of the times that we had said, or the times which, I mean, it was like everything had been changed, you know. And that was kind of the way that things worked.

I observed a less severe example of this at a district campus advisory council training session. Participants were asked to identify a concern that they hoped would be covered by the training. Several teachers and a parent began brainstorming and decided that conflict management was their primary concern. The principal, who had been away from the table, asked what they had come up with. They told him, and then he informed them that he believed the main concern was "learning how to bring the community together with the school as a hub for the purpose of the children." Without another word the group's " concern" had changed from conflict management to bringing the school and community together.

The principal's leadership style also shapes expectations. The following example describes one person's view of this relationship: "The principal has a real hold on them [teachers]. He is authoritative and possibly even forces teachers to do things that they wouldn't do otherwise. He expects them to comply, and they do." Another interviewee stated:

> My idea is that parents and teachers should be working together to improve the school. But that doesn't happen here. But you have to understand that, when you have a controlling factor over here that controls everything. . . and you know it's just impossible to change something, you're like hitting a brick wall with him [the principal]. And so it's like why bother to try.

While the first comment views the principal's use of power favorably because it meant things would get accomplished, the second comment indicated that such expectations hinder teacher and parent initiative.

Parents are also affected by the principal's leadership style and expectations. At each of the school events I attended (e.g., back to school night, PTA meetings, performances) the school principal reminded

parents how important their involvement is. For example, at the kindergarten graduation, the principal discussed in length the importance of parental involvement to his captive audience. After he finished, he thanked them and asked them to stand and take the following pledge: "I [parent's name] parent of [child's name] will assure my child my full support to get all the possible education he can get. I will see he attends school daily. I will see he does his homework. I will conference with his teachers, often." The parents (and grandparents too) did as they were asked. They raised their right hands and repeated the pledge. Through messages such as these, which are repeated over and over, the school principal is seeking to shape parent's views of their relationship with the school and their responsibilities in regards to their children's education.

Ironically, one teacher noted that the principal's leadership style may actually preclude parental involvement at the school. She asserted:

> I think the way he runs the school may stifle involvement. I think keeping the expectation [for involvement] at the level that it is, it does. And I think it works not only with the parents but I think it's passed on to the faculty. That same influence is felt by the faculty. The correlates [teacher planning and decision making groups] don't necessarily work because there is no expectation.

Another teacher noted that expectations have been set up for how parents will be involved. She stated:

> Well, parental involvement in this other school I worked in was different. I think that most of them have, most of the people who are parents in that school have the idea that teachers are partners in their children's education. . . Here I think that teachers have more power. I think the expectations are just a bit different. . . Parents don't play as large of a role in the school here. They never have. They aren't expected to.

That parents are not expected to be involved may explain why parents rarely speak out at CAC, PTA, dual language, or other meetings in which they are included. Another interviewee asserted that the school has a history of low parental involvement. "It is sort of a mind-set now for many parents. You could change it though, if you were committed."

Power and Culture. Research on parental involvement has found that the school is a symbol of power and authority for many Mexican-American parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Harry, 1993).

Consequently, many parents uncritically trust the school to appropriately care for and educate their children (Fuller, 1997). This is the case at Chavez. One mother, Rene,[11] said: "I think Chavez is a good school. . . . The teachers are good, helpful. They care about the kids, I think." Many school staff members recognize the trust that parents have in the school and school leaders. One interviewee commented: "Our principal maintains a caring and safe school. He stresses safety, and he projects caring about the kids, and I think parents like that. He puts in tons of time, and is highly supportive." Another stated:

> Some parents know the principal pretty well and teachers too because they have been here and the parents--some of them--have had more than one child here. And I think they feel good about the school. We don't hear many complaints. Parents seem to be pretty happy with us here.

It is interesting that this teacher associates a lack of complaints with satisfaction or even happiness. According to Lauria (1968), Mexican-American parents may appear content out of "respeto." If this is the case, then how do school personnel know whether they truly have the trust of the community or if what they are experiencing is actually deference? Further, when Mexican-American parents come into contact with school professionals, a "generalized deference" comes into play (Lauria, 1968). For example, another mother, Gloria, complained:

> My son got into trouble one time--a fight--it wasn't his fault even, but they sent him to the alternative school. I could not believe it! It wasn't his fault but... But what could I do about it? They had already decided to send him away to the other school. I didn't say anything.

This comment may reveal more a sense of powerlessness on Gloria's part than a sense of trust. She did not feel she could challenge the school's decision and deferred to its authority instead. Harry (1993) points out that "it is particularly hard for parents who feel they have no power. . . to confront the very authorities to whom they must, every day, entrust their children" (p. 166).

It appears that few school staff members understand these behaviors and beliefs. This lack of knowledge has led to misunderstandings. For example, one teacher stated:

> I've worked with the community for a few years now, and I don't know. They just don't ask many questions. I tell them what I think and then that's it. They rarely disagree or offer other explanations. It just "OK." I used to think I was just, you know, right. But now I sometimes wonder if they are listening.

It is very likely that this teacher does not understand the cultural practice of deference or respect. If this teacher better understood the tradition of respect, it is less likely that she would simply tell "them" what she thought. Harry (1993) points out the importance of gaining the parents' perspective. Gaining their perspective demonstrates to parents that you value what they have done to support their children and that you value the information they have to offer. Reciprocity of respect is an important component of the traditional practice of deference (Lauria, 1968).

The cultural practice of trust or deference leaves no check on administrator power. For example, at one PTA meeting the principal was explaining the recent changes in their students' Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) scores. Although there was an increase in most areas, there was a substantial decrease in scores at one grade level. Only one parent spoke up during the explanation. Interestingly, the parent who asked the question was a father, the PTA co-president, and the only father present. He asked why these particular scores were so low. The principal provided a number of reasons that included among others: newer teachers at that grade level, non-aligned curriculum, cultural bias in the test, and a new state rule that restricts students who are limited English proficient from taking the Spanish version of the TAAS more than one year. His explanation went unquestioned. Neither the father nor any of the mothers said a word. According to Harris (1993) not questioning authority figures is common among minority parents. It may be difficult for these parents, particularly the mothers, to openly express their disagreement with school personnel because of the effects of their status differentials (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity) and the school norms that place parents in a relatively powerless position.

Power Unchecked. In general, school personnel feel comfortable when parents are involved in their children's education at home or at school as volunteers. However, there is a level of involvement that teachers and administrators are not always comfortable with, that of advocacy. When parents become advocates for children they become decision makers, serving as equal partners on committees and councils. Some work within the system. Others who feel the system is not working will try to make changes through other means.

To make needed changes, one must be able to challenge authority. However, school personnel often seek to stifle potential challenges, to exert control over their environments, and to keep some grievances from being heard. Although the mothers at Chavez do not appear to be very familiar with the

practice of challenging authority, interviewees were able to recall several failed attempts. The most frequently mentioned story was about several individual mothers who were against the implementation of year round schooling. The principal, who effectively built a large cadre of supporters among teachers and parents, used his supporters to "stack the deck" at school-community meetings. Positive speeches filled each of the meeting agendas, and although the meetings were touted as opportunities to share concerns, concerns were never given an opportunity to be either voiced or addressed. When parents approached the principal with their concerns they were told to "trust him" or give the program some time, or they were told that their fears were unfounded. According to one school member, parent concerns were never taken seriously during the process, even the concerns of parents who supported the year round schooling program. Another teacher commented:

> We didn't really let parents participate in that decision. I think we kind of coerced them. I think we did. We were for it. We, as a faculty, I know, were all for that. And we did send home fliers, and we did ask the parents what they thought, and we kind of talked them into it. And so the majority of those fliers and surveys that came back agreed with us, because we put on a real good selling program to them, OK? But they really didn't have a say. Not really. Many of them probably didn't care, I don't think. Many of them saw it as an advantage. Many of them didn't care one way or the other. I know that there were some that were against it, but, unless they moved out of the district, they had no, out of this particular school district, this area, then they really had no say-so, so there was no choice there. OK? Decisions like that should have more input from parents because it affects them and their kids.

Another teacher raised a different problem, this teacher stated that she felt that if parents knew more about the system of passing children on in the school, they would be more vocal; however, she then stated that she did not think parents knew how to go about challenging authority. She stated:

> The children are not academically ready to be moved on to the next grade level, but, because there is a very negative attitude about retention, and I understand that, that I think it's just a shame. Because you have parents thinking that their kids are doing well, and they're being passed on, and they're able to handle the work at the next grade level. And we know they're not. . . To a certain degree, too, sometimes children are not treated the way they need to be treated...in the right way. And I think that if parents were more aware, then that would be

> something that they could also tackle. . . But then, I don't think parents would know what to do about it if they did know.

This teacher then mentioned a group that she knew about that showed parents how to advocate for themselves and their children. The group is called Interfaith. She said:

> A group that. . . I saw really made a lot of difference, and really got in there and saw how parents could be important. . . was the Interfaith group. . . I mean, talk about getting parents involved and educating them and teaching them how to go into a school, look at a school, and be able to evaluate that school, see what needed to be done. And you know, I kind of feel like that needs to be done outside the school. Because, if you're doing it within the school and you're making yourself open to or, I guess you're being led is what I'm saying, being led to where they want you to go. Whereas, if you're outside of the school, then you're a little bit more open, you're able to talk a little bit more freely, you're able to say, you know, "These are the things that we need to look at. Let's go in and look at them.". . . It would be more objective if you were coming in from out of the school as opposed to, you know, being controlled by someone from the school.

The Interfaith group, the teacher described above, did attempt to get involved with parents at Chavez a few years ago. If fact, their attempt provides an example of what happens when traditional patterns of authority are challenged.

> An attempt was made to get teachers and parents involved in that [school improvement]. We tried to get Chavez parents to become more involved in Interfaith so that they could become more informed. . . . The one person that that happened to just happened to butt heads with the principal. And that really became a problem. It became more destructive than. . . It was a parent who was a member of Interfaith who learned what to do and what questions to ask and all of that, and came in wanting to find out some answers, and practically had the door shut in her face. In other words, "That's none of your business."

This quote as well as several other versions of this incident demonstrate a refusal by the principal to work with an organization that is known for its parental empowerment activities. This teacher felt Interfaith would benefit parents in that the group was known for teaching parents how to advocate for their children and become meaningfully involved in the school. The principal, however, viewed the group as a threat to his

control over the school. He stated that he was "not interested in having them involved with [his] parents or [his] school."

According to Mahoney (1981) community cooperation and participation (through groups such as Interfaith) are essential to increasing power to ensure that public officials (like principals) act in the best interest of their community. At Chavez there are no strong parent-led groups. These quotes also highlight how difficult it is for parents to gain access to information. First of all most parents do not know what information they need and why they need it. Secondly, when parents do know what information they would like to have, it is not always easy to access.

In sum, Chavez personnel appear to have developed an informal parental involvement policy that includes levels of parental involvement that go beyond the activities identified in the school's campus improvement plan. Further, this informal policy ensures a broad range of involvement activities is available to parents, and it better reflects the involvement of the mothers included in this study. Upon critical examination, however, the school's efforts to involve parents are affected by several factors, which, in turn, tend to affect parent involvement. These factors include issues of participation and power. Power appears to be most influential on administrators' relationships and interactions with parents and teachers. Parental involvement is also affected by practices such as promoting activities that do not actively engage the parent, leaving parents out of the planning process, and failing to ensure true parental representativeness on various school committees. Status inequalities and social norms, actions, and expectations do not support parental involvement in such a way as to make parents partners in their children's education.

Mexican-American Mothers and Parental Involvement Policy: Synthesis and Disaggregation

The above sub-sections provide a glimpse of the continuities and discontinuities between the data sets. It is in these findings and particularly in the differences between the findings that the utility of a multiple-framed research design is evidenced. In this sub-section, I will first provide a synthesis of the two data sets. Then I will delineate several examples of continuities and discontinuities revealed through this multiple-framed research project and their implications for policy and practice.

Synthesis

It appears that little or no effort has been made to organize a cohesive parental involvement policy or program that combines the ideas and aspirations of policy makers, school personnel, and parents. As described in a previous section, there is a lack of continuity regarding the way parental involvement is defined and the mothers involvement. This lack of continuity is reflected in the school's parental involvement policy. First, there is no definition of parental involvement in the document. Second, the rationale given for parental involvement is not represented by either the involvement activities or evaluation criteria specified. Third, there is disagreement concerning the goal of parental involvement. For example, some identify increasing student achievement; others hope parental involvement will help parents feel comfortable in the school.

In order to effectively implement an educational change, schools must not only determine a vision for the program, they must also identify a need. However, no need has been identified for parental involvement at Chavez. It is difficult to give up time and energy to implement a policy for which one cannot identify a need. Further, the lack of an identified need is even more of a problem when the policy in question is merely one of many being implemented (Fullan, 1991). Chavez has a large number of programs that have been implemented in recent years. Thus, even if school personnel feel parental involvement is needed, they may not feel it is needed as much as something else. Additionally, teachers noted that while the principal encourages innovation and activities, he typically does not provide support to sustain efforts. Consequently, teachers may be less willing to shift their energies.

Moreover, very few members of the school community, whether parents or school staff, were familiar with the school's formal parental involvement policy included in the CIP. Of the individuals I interviewed, only members of the Campus Advisory Council (CAC) were familiar with the policy. Even fewer were knowledgeable of the district's policy. When school members were asked to identify a school policy or program, most listed activities in which parents were involved. Of these activities, few mentioned those specified in the CIP.

Chavez personnel have developed an informal parental involvement policy that includes levels of parental involvement that extend beyond the activities identified in the school's CIP. This informal policy ensures a broad range of involvement activities is available to parents, and it better reflects the involvement of the mothers included in this study. However, a critical examination of even informal

parental involvement reveals the effects of power, authority, participation, and representation. For example, school personnel refer to the activities they design as parental involvement, and yet, parents are not involved in planning these activities. Parents are not members of the parental involvement correlate. Parents are not involved in setting times or agendas for CAC meetings or other events. Parents have little voice in what goes on concerning parental involvement or what happens in the school at large.

Americorp members plan and run family math nights; musical concerts are planned by the choir director, band director, and school administrators; and CAC meetings are planned by school administrators. This lack of parental involvement in planning is problematic because school personnel are not able to see or experience parental involvement from the perspective of the Chavez parents. Thus, activities or expectations may be planned or developed without knowledge of certain logistical needs, such as time and child care, or without understanding the informational needs or interests of the parent community.

Further, parental experiences at Chavez are situated within pervasive structures of power. Power at Chavez is concentrated in the school's leadership. The principal is the primary power holder in the school, and his actions and comments demonstrate that he does not feel he should share power with either parents or teachers. Consequently, many teachers and parents do not buy into activities such as shared decision making. They believe he may override the decisions they make, regardless of their work, time, or feelings. His lack of willingness to share power stifles parent and teacher initiative and involvement.

The effects of power become more problematic when one considers the interplay between power and the effect that status differentials have on the self efficacy, interactions, and participation patterns of the mothers. Together, these factors create a dynamic that disallows mothers from accessing and utilizing power. When women feel inadequate, they undervalue themselves. Additionally, their ability to assert themselves, their beliefs, or their concerns regarding the needs of their children will be weakened. Further, they may choose not to voice their concerns at all (Dwyer & Bruce, 1988). Additionally, this subordinate posture is reinforced by school norms and expectations. In this study, it was found that parents rarely question teachers or administrators, and only one teacher was able to recall a parent challenging school authority. Consequently, status quo norms, actions, and expectations at Chavez do not support parental involvement in such a way as to make parents partners in their children's education.

Disaggregation

The synthesis demonstrated that both sub-studies revealed disagreements among and between parents, teachers, and administrators concerning the definition of parental involvement, the optimal form of parental involvement, the importance of parental involvement, and the way parental involvement should be implemented. Additionally, the findings of each study made it clear that parents and school personnel lacked knowledge of the school's parental involvement policy. Indeed, beyond the members of the school's, CAC few appeared to know very much about the policy.

These findings have implications for policy and practice. For example, weak communication at the school appears to negatively affect the implementation of parental involvement at Chavez. The policy document is unclear, and school staff are not effectively communicating with either their parent population or with each other. Confusion, misunderstandings, and frustration have resulted from this lack of two-way and meaningful communication. Efforts should be put toward clear communication, mutual understanding, and consensus building.

The similarities, however, stopped there. In the first stage of the research, the above problems were attributed to the lack of a cohesive and comprehensive parental involvement policy. I demonstrated the necessity of identifying a need, a vision, and clear roles and responsibilities. In the second stage, I asserted that a lack of shared power, participation, and communication as well as unequal home-school relations explained the disagreements and lack of understanding regarding the school's policy. These discontinuities are a product of the theoretical frame used to interpret and analyze the data, and they imply very different implications for policy and practice. One group of findings draws attention to policy development and implementation procedures. The other group highlights the important role that power, authority, participation, and representation play in the success of parental involvement and implies the necessity of changes in school organization and leadership.

Implications for Research

I believe my research, which used a multiple-framed qualitative research design, has made a contribution to understanding the nature of parental involvement for Mexican-American women from low income communities.[12] More importantly, however, I feel this project has shown that there are different

ways of knowing and understanding the world, from different points of view, and that these different vantage points can affect research findings and thus policy based on research.

Several implications for research can be generated from the findings of this study. First, findings identified here should be added to the growing literature on parental involvement for mothers as well as minority and low-income parents. Researchers who work with Mexican-American mothers from low-income communities may then attempt to replicate (or refute) the findings of this study. Moreover, additional studies of similar parent populations that focus either on the nature of parental involvement or the relationship between involvement and parental involvement policy will increase the validity of this study's findings. A number of findings identified in this research are congruent with other research on minority and/or low-income parental involvement (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, Harry, 1993; Lareau, 1994) and with studies of parental involvement in general (e.g., Epstein, 1994), thus increasing the trustworthiness of this literature.

Second, this research points in the direction of future studies. For example, a closer scrutiny of the involvement of mothers and their families in education will facilitate an analysis of political questions in education regarding gender, race, class, ethnicity, conflict, and power. We also need to know more about informal parental involvement; we need many more studies that focus on how parental involvement experiences outside the school affect student learning and development. In fact, little is known about the outside educational experiences of children from low-income Mexican-American families. Additionally, we need more research concerned with how the status quo beliefs, activities, and expectations serve to disempower Mexican-American mothers and other non-majority parents. A delineation of these structures of power would strengthen the case for altering them. Further, researchers should seek out school leaders who are willing to engage in action research projects that investigate how practice can be changed to support the parental involvement of non-majority group parents in their children's education.

Third, it has been argued in this paper that educational policy research is limited by its reliance on a single theoretical frame. Thus, this study sought to explore the utility of a multiple framed research design. The two stages of research did produce both shared and unshared findings. Researchers engaged in educational policy research may wish to use a multiple-framed research design in their practice, particularly those engaged in research on parental involvement. To move in the direction of more successful home-school relationships, we need to know more about the perspectives of parents,

teachers, and administrators, and we need to reveal these perspectives through more than a single theoretical perspective. One must not fall prey to what Mahoney (1981) refers to as reality mirages. By accepting a singular explanation of a phenomenon as reality we are slighting other views in the process.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, I conclude that the methods and theoretical frames used by researchers shape the findings of our research as well as the policy based on such findings to a greater degree than one might believe. Further, in order to better understand the research problems we study, we must expand and diversify the repertoire of theories and the methods of research and analysis that we use in our research. Finally, the multiple-framed approach will establish a more holistic and vivid method for understanding educational phenomena (e.g., parental involvement), and it will constitute a more rigorous social scientific understanding of the educational policy process.

The foremost purpose of this study was to demonstrate the utility of a multiple-frame method for policy research. This approach could affect our decisions about what problems we decide to research, how we approach problems, what questions we ask, what we pay attention to, and what factors we decide to ignore. Further, having policy researchers utilizing differing theories and perspectives in their research should provide a fuller picture of educational phenomena. As described previously, factors hidden from the view of one perspective may be illuminated by another, providing perhaps a more informed space from which to shape policy. Moreover, by moving beyond the norm and attempting to utilize a theoretical perspective that is not traditionally included in the policy analysis canon, this study provides a fuller description and understanding of parental involvement for Mexican-American mothers from low-income communities. Similarly, this move should facilitate the illumination of methods for developing and improving relationships between schools and low-income families and, thus, increase the continuum of policy options and solutions available to us.

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Footnotes

[1] A paradigm is a road map of cognition (Kuhn, 1962); that is, paradigms are systems of belief. They are lenses through which we look at our world. The term ". . . refers to the full range of assumptions and practices associated with fundamental theoretical approaches" (Morrow, 1994,p. 6). The stories we tell and the research we conduct are couched within them and/or framed by them.

[2] The ontological nature of research a research project is identified by answering the question: "What is the nature of reality, and therefore, what is there that can be known about it?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). In traditional research, it is assumed that there is a "real" reality. However scholars may disagree about whether or not that reality is apprehensible (positivism) or not (postpositivism).

[3] Epistemology is the study of the relationship between the knower and what can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology is related to ontology in that if the researcher believes in a real and apprehensible reality then his relationship as a knower to what can be known will be objective.

[4] That the traditional perspective has many strengths is not at issue here; traditional policy methods have proven their productiveness.

[5] Policy as well as reactions to policy were viewed as forms of communicative action in this study.

[6] This is a pseudonym.

[7] For a discussion of how the methodology differed for the two sub-studies see chapter seven of Young (1997).

[8] For detailed individual analysis of the two data sets, see chapters five and six of Young (1997).

[9] A stronger emphasis was placed on exploring the historical and social context in the second stage of research due not only to the critical lens being used but also to the use of ethnographic methods.

[10] A phrase used by Carolyn Wanat at the University of Iowa who studies parental involvement.

[11] Rene is one of the four mothers who participated in this stage of the research. The others are: Tina, Gloria, and Sylvia. These names are pseudonyms.

[12] In the process of using the traditional and critical frames to understand parental involvement policy and practice at Chavez, much is still left to be done. For example, I have not fully explored the role that method -v- theory played on the data. Theoretically, the stress on power may have led me to underplay or underinvestigate the significance of challenges that have occurred. Further, there are empirical and methodological issues that require exploration and reflection.

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