

## CONCEPTUALIZING (IMMIGRANT) PARENTS AS KNOWLEDGEABLE ADULTS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES

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### **Abstract:**

Immigrant parents' involvement in schools is often situated in literature within a framework of barriers and challenges that presumes deficit. *What if we describe (immigrant) parents through a framework of agency and knowledge? What would support from school and teachers look like, if they see parents in an agentic role? What would it mean for teachers and schools to learn (about their students) from parents?* These inquiries stem from personal stories of parenting in the United States as a migrant scholar and seek to situate (immigrant) parents' involvement within a framework of advocacy and agency.

### **An Inquiry Into Parental Involvement**

Continuous immigration into the United States over last few decades has meant a sustained discussion around education and school experiences of immigrant students and the academic gap faced by them (Antony-Newman, 2019; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009). Along with their language and cultural differences, lack of parental involvement has been blamed for this academic gap, taking attention away from the need to be culturally responsive, having better policies to integrate students, or understanding students home contexts. The conversation about immigrant parents' involvement is often situated within the framework of barriers, restrictions, and challenges around language, socioeconomic class, and citizenship (Turney & Kao, 2009) that presume deficit (Miano, 2011). These are seen as impediments to immigrant parents' effective involvement in the academic journey of their child(ren). Schools and teachers are encouraged to support parents so that a healthy school, teacher, and parent partnership may be forged for better academic outcomes. Parents who are new to the U.S. education system do need information and support from teachers, but at the same time they are adults in their children's lives, those who know the most about them (Campano et al., 2016). The understandings that they have about their own children can offer insight that their teachers may not get because of the limited classroom interaction.

This inquiry into parental involvement in children's academic journeys stems from my own experiences of being seen as an immigrant parent in the United States and as an educator in a community based intergenerational literacy program in India. I see parents as active supporters of their children's learning and strong advocates for their children in schools. However, in the scholarship around parental involvement in schools, these narratives of agency are missing. Research has highlighted the funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) that students bring into the classroom, however, I could not locate research focusing on parents as *knowledgeable adults* in their children's lives. Epstein (1995) writes: "If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students" (p. 701). Here, parental involvement implies being a partner. I raise my hand to ask: *Who gets to define the rules of this partnership?*

More specifically, I ask: *What if we describe (immigrant) parents through a framework of agency and knowledge? What would support from school and teachers look like, if they see parents in an agentic role? What would it mean for teachers and schools to learn (about their students) from parents?* These are the questions that guide this inquiry. I seek to conceptualize parental involvement through a narrative of agency. I have put *immigrant* in parentheses wherever it is in relation to me, to highlight how I navigate this space of being seen as an immigrant parent and being a migrant in the United States. In this commentary, the conversation about parental involvement emanates through the lens of a parent (me) who is transnational citizen, where *trans*-denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something (Ong, 1999). As a mother, who is also an academic migrant, the inquiries in this writing stem from personal experiences of parenting in the United States the last four years. As an international graduate student, home is, at this moment in time, across two countries. I have often used the term *academic migrant* for myself—to denote a person residing in a country (in my case, the United States) other than their native country (India) for a particular purpose (scholarship). However, in my interactions with my children's schools and teachers, I am seen as an immigrant parent.

This conceptual piece is interspersed with vignettes of my parenting as I see my stories of parenting as my “theories and legitimate data” (Brayboy, 2006, p. 439). I use these stories as a way to center the inquiries I have come in with and “co-envision a solution to potential questions” (San Pedro, 2018, p. 1197). In the first section, I look at how parental involvement is defined or perceived by schools, teachers, and (immigrant) parents, and the two prominent frameworks that are often used for parental involvement—a framework of barriers (for immigrant parental involvement) and a framework of academic achievement. The second section is based on a personal testimonio and situates (immigrant) parents’ involvement within a framework of advocacy to challenge the language of powerlessness.

## Defining Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in children’s education is linked to academic and behavioral success in school (Turney & Kao, 2009). It has also been conceptualized as a form of social capital; the ability of middle-class parents to socialize their children into established school norms (Lareau, 2007). Doucet (2011) points out that the rituals that surround parental involvement communicate to parents the norms regarding their role in schools and their children’s education. Parental involvement ranges from providing support in school, from volunteering—participation in school functions staying connected with class and school requirements—to helping children with schoolwork and extracurricular work at home (Paulson, 1994; Doucet, 2011). However, teacher and parent expectations and definitions about parental involvement may differ (Petroni, 2016). Where teachers/schools may seek volunteers for school projects, parents may view involvement as helping their child with schoolwork (Antony-Newman, 2019). (Immigrant) parents, “...coming from different cultural and educational backgrounds, bring in distinctive sets of expectations, often not corresponding to those of teachers” (Antony-Newman, 2019, p. 367).

I experienced this dissonance when my children joined their new school in Philadelphia. While the schools that my children attended in India required me to help with and monitor schoolwork, their school in the United States did not have this expectation laid out explicitly. I expected the teacher to share the syllabus and the academic plan with me and found it particularly disorienting to not know the day-to-day academic life of my children. My questions to them about the same were met with, “She is doing fine. I wouldn’t worry about her,” or something to that effect. In hindsight, I realize why this made me uncomfortable; it felt condescending. I was not worried; I felt left out. Our definitions of parental involvement did not match. *How might a recognition and validation of my desire to be involved in my child’s academic life, support me, my children, and the teacher?* While I am aware of my particular positionalities here (of being an educator and education researcher) in raising this question, I do believe that there is a need for schools to be really intentional about learning *from* parents.

Based on research in K–12 contexts, Epstein (1995) offers a framework of six types of parental involvement that are/can be built by schools that include assistance with *parenting, communicating* (designing effective forms of home-to-school and school-to-home communications), *volunteering* at school, *learning at home* (information on ideas to families to help students at home with homework), including parents in *decision making* at school, and *collaborating with community*. Epstein further offers expected results for these types of involvement for teachers, parents, and students. This prescriptive framework focuses on advising teachers on how to work with parents (Miano, 2011). The expected results for teachers range from understanding family backgrounds and needs, readiness to involve families in new ways, better design of homework, to an awareness of parent perspectives. For parents, the framework delineates expected results, including: an understanding and confidence about parenting, understanding the teachers’ job, knowing how to support students at home, and awareness of school policies. For students the expected results could be: homework completion, view of parents as more similar to teachers and of home as more similar to school, and making informed decision about courses.

In this framework, however, there is no focus on parental knowing/knowledge; it centers schools, teachers, and school-based practices. Doucet (2011) says that these ritualized practices of parental involvement “subsume(s) parents into a dominant, mainstream model of involvement” (p. 404) and marginalize diverse families. *While it is important for schools and teachers to think about how to build an effective partnership with parents, can there be a place for teachers and schools to see parents as advocates for their students and as **knowing adults** in their children’s lives? As a resource from whom teachers might learn more about their students? Can we raise the question: **What practices allow teachers to learn from parents?***

## Immigrant Parents and Parental Involvement

Immigrant parental involvement is largely framed within a framework of academic achievement (to reduce academic gaps) or a framework of barriers (to parental involvement). As compared to their white counterparts, immigrant parents of color are also perceived as less involved in their children’s education (Miano, 2011). Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), state that there is a “reductive tendency in the social sciences to seek and accept singular effects to explain social and cognitive phenomena” (p. 20), one which tries to characterize the experience of people from similar cultures “without ‘locating’ the commonalities within individuals” (p. 21). This universalistic view of dominant perspectives then creates and perpetuates inequity (Hoodfar, 1992).

Parental involvement is seen as an important indicator of academic achievement (Epstein, 1987; Antony-Newman, 2019). Although this framing acknowledges the consequential role of parent involvement, it also situates it within particular neoliberal language of education and achievement that measures academic success. Antony Newman's (2019) meta-synthesis of empirical studies shows that parental involvement is seen by policymakers, if not as the panacea, then definitely as an important condition for reducing the so-called achievement gap. Parents need to be involved to ensure their child's success; teachers and schools need parents to support this academic journey; academic success is linked to parent involvement. In this framing, the onus is placed on parents to be involved, not only at home but also at school, with teachers and schools as mentors in this process (Epstein, 1995). Parents who are involved (meeting teachers, attending PTA meetings, doing extracurricular activities) care for the learning of their children and hence their success at school (Doucet, 2008). Once again, the school/teacher is centered and the rhetoric of the parental role in academic achievement misses the space of advocacy parents might already be working from for their children. (Immigrant) parents are active agents in deciding their fluid parenting practices, choosing those that maximize their children's learning as they evaluate the value and practicality of maintaining specific traditional learning styles of their home country, and the benefits of adopting certain practices of the host country (Chan, 2018).

Most literature on parental involvement focuses on immigrant parents' involvement as steeped in a framework of barriers. Antony-Newman's (2019) meta-synthesis also shows that (immigrant) parents face two salient challenges to their involvement: language and an unfamiliar education system. Parents' (perceived) skills or lack thereof, availability of time, socio-cultural status, and family structure have been researched to see how these impact parents' engagement with schools (Turney & Kao, 2009). If it is true that "parental capacity to be actively involved in their children's education is not equally distributed with class, race, gender, and immigrant status all playing important roles" (Baquedano-López et al., 2013, as cited in Antony-Newman, 2019, p. 363), what does "actively involved" mean, what qualifies as being involved, whose definition is this based on, and what is this being measured against? Unfamiliarity with school system, school culture, school policies is a barrier that new parents, (immigrant) parents, or parents of first-generation students may face. The literature locates the impact of these above-mentioned factors on parental involvement. Yet, these are restrictions to certain *specific forms* of parental involvement norms. Inquiring into how these parental involvement norms evolved and who gets to define parental involvement might offer insight into this construct of parental involvement and an alternative to these (normative) conceptions of parental involvement. Turney and Kao (2009) share that though immigrant parents reported facing substantial barriers to getting involved in their children's schools, "it is possible that they were able to overcome these barriers and have a relationship with teachers and administrators at their children's schools" (p. 264).

### **Testimonio: November 27, 2019**

It was test day and my daughter called me from school, distraught and inconsolable. One of her teachers had found pen markings on her hand and assumed that she was cheating on her test. Seeing her upset, her English teacher, who supported her, asked her to take a picture of her hand to show she was not cheating. I was grateful for his help, but it made me deeply uncomfortable to see how this was being dealt with at school—a crime that needs evidence, proof to show your innocence. She had not cheated, but what if she had? Would the teacher just brand her a cheater? Thus, branded, the student will carry the stigma, the pain. I wrote to her teacher to tell him that I stood by her statement unequivocally:

*As her parent I know her. I know she would never cheat...as her mother and as someone who is raising honest kids, I believe her.... I have told her that I am ok with her being marked a zero on her paper or with any disciplinary actions that you may wish to take. I am not mailing in to ask you to let her off. You have to do what you feel is right. To hear her repeatedly say, 'my teacher did not believe me,' was distressing. This, to me, is more upsetting than anything else. But these are life lessons for her—she will find herself in situations where her words will not be valued or believed or trusted. She will also learn to be careful about these things. I have asked her to go to the counselor because she is really upset. I wish there was a way for teachers to get more time to understand their students better at school, and not just through the lens of grades. You would have believed her then. What do you think happens to the spirits of our children and students when valued adults choose to stick to only one side of what they think is the truth?*

*My number is in my signature, in case you wish to speak to me. Else an email response is fine.*

He called up a few hours later but had not yet read the email. His first words to me were: "There has been an unfortunate incident; I caught your child cheating." My daughter was right. He had not heard her out. He had decided that she had cheated and called up with the news of failure. Parents are called to be informed about failure and not successes. I asked him to stop, read the email and then call me. After our call, I wrote a brief email to him:

*I will greatly appreciate if you hear my child out without judging her. I believe her and will only stand up for her when she is not in the wrong. I would only be doing her a disservice by standing by her in her lie....*

At school next morning, the teacher told my daughter that he believed her. He had seen her paper and he knew she had not cheated. It was important for my daughter that her teacher listen to her, believe her. For me, it was important that my child not feel dehumanized and silenced.

### **Advocacy: Challenging the Language of Powerlessness**

I, as an advocate for my child, helped a teacher make the right decision for their student. I could challenge the teacher's narrative about the incident and encourage them to adopt a humanizing stance with their student. This particular incident more than any in the past became a catalyst in helping me engage more deeply with the framework of agency and advocacy for parental involvement. Can we (parents) imagine a partnership with teachers, where they reach out to us not just to complain or keep us in the loop about a potential problem, but to partner with us to better understand their students? Parents and teachers are allies. Forging a relationship with parents, offers teachers an opportunity to learn not just about their students but also reimagining parental involvement as school's involvement with parents. Parents may have a lot to teach *about* their children.

I situate my narratives of parenting as testimonios to invoke the power of counter storytelling and to foreground my knowledge as a parent. Testimonios, as Delgado Bernal (2018) shares, is how we are "able to know each other's stories through voices, silences, bodies, and emotions" (p. 27). Testimonios allow us to theorize from our bodies (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) with the objective to bring to light our point of view or an urgent call to action (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). It is about writing what we know best and that includes experiences of parenting with the goal of achieving new understanding (Delgado Bernal, 2018). Though this testimonio is unique to me as a transnational/migrant parent, testimonios are part of a collective experience, and knowing each other's (parenting) stories—the sharing of testimonios creates new understandings (about parent/ing) and makes space for passing down of knowledge that can be both cathartic and instructive (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2018). Parents everyday life experiences with their children, are their stories. Parents may offer valuable insights about their children to schools/teachers.

A narrative of care, barriers, and student achievement is often used while speaking about parental involvement. The emphasis on offering support to and forging partnerships within studies and school policy minimizes the strong support that parents can offer to teachers and constructs instead a view of parents as "passive recipients of educational guidance" (Antony-Newman, 2019). Miano's (2011) study highlights that (immigrant) parents' involvement does not fall always into the prescriptive definition offered by schools. For example, the participants shared that just being present in their child's school was an opportunity to interact with the school community to get to know about the happenings at school/their child's progress and help them navigate the U.S. education system. This calls attention to the agentic actions that parents take to support and be involved in their child's academic life.

Further, parents' life experiences influence their current beliefs; immigrant parents experiences of marginalization and resistance influence their parenting practices (Miano, 2011). The "communication, practices, and learning" (Delgado Bernal, 2018, p. 26) that parents engage in at home might not dismantle structural and institutional inequities that exist, but they can create transformative ruptures—incidents and moments that disrupt dominant discourses offering hope and possibility of change in everyday life of children. A better understanding of these pedagogies of home (Delgado Bernal, 2001, 2018) that emanate from resistance, agency, and advocacy can help develop policy on parental involvement that builds on household knowledge, thus offering teachers a valuable resource in their classrooms. By defining parental involvement in ways that is not inclusive of the (im)migrant and transnational parent, schools limit the possibility of redefining and reimagining parental involvement that include new ways and practices (Doucet, 2008). Top-down models of parental involvement curtail our understanding of the various ways parents participate in their children lives and the choices they make to ensure their learning.

Finally, we must acknowledge that our experiences of one another will always be partial. Subjectivities are contradictory, partial, and irreducible to a single master discourse (Ellsworth, 1989; Hoodfar, 1992); any alliances for change would have to be based on understanding of working across differences.

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