Creating Links, "Atando Cabitos:" Connecting Parents, Communities, and Future Teachers on the U.S./Mexico Border

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the conceptual framework and preliminary findings from a compendium of studies on school-university-community partnerships in Latino communities, with a focus on lessons learned on the U.S./Mexico border. The voices of professors, school administrators, and students with whom the co-authors have worked over a period of seven years in collaborative research are woven throughout the narrative. In this article, participants from the University of Texas at El Paso, together with K-12 school partners and parents, as well as supporting evidence from participants in diverse communities in Oklahoma, Florida, and Georgia, describe the impacts of the processes of collaborative planning, implementation, and evaluation of family/community-based projects on schools, families, and the education of future teachers.

Key Words: parental engagement, school-university-community partnerships, collaboration, Hispanic communities, English language learners, preservice teachers

Introduction

> Education of a child is more than what it may seem to be…[I]t means providing entry and access to children and their parents who may not have been inside of that system before. The stronger the links…the stronger we become as a faculty, as a society, as a people…Ideally, it takes every one of us, building a process, sharing what we have to offer in order to accomplish this. And so, the schools become a focus, especially in communities like "La Colina"* where there aren't a lot of services…The cultural perspectives of the majority of people who live here—Hispanic new arrivals or here one generation (they're in the second generation now)—have very direct impact in terms of how parents view education. They value schooling highly, but they don't know how to engage with that process…Yet there's a great fear on the part of most education professionals to reach out into the community. There's a discomfort about how to reach out to them. Teachers ask me, "What do I say to them?" "How do I share with them?" It really has to be a two-way street; that connection has to be built on learning from one another. Instead of professionals teaching the people, it's a common bond with all of us learning from one another…just learning how to get along with different kinds of people has enormous value…
>
> (Henry G., La Colina Elementary School Principal)*
> *Pseudonyms used to protect confidentiality of schools and individuals.

In recent decades, educators, researchers, politicians, and community members have come to realize that it takes a whole community to educate a child. Researchers and practitioners alike (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Price & Valli, 2005; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003) have asserted that an empowered citizenry requires a new definition of education that combines community development, formal schooling, and social change (Prinsloo & Breier, 1997; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Shor & Pari, 1999). While this conclusion has long been foundational to our understanding of the relationship between school and society, changes in modern families have increased the urgency for educators to learn to look beyond the walls of the classroom, engaging parents and communities as partners in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational policies and curricula.

Studies indicate that schools and universities cannot train people in narrow specializations and expect them to lead or manage change in the increasingly complex nature of life and professional work in the 21st century (e.g., Goodlad,

1994; Nieto, 2002; Stokes, 1997; Strand et al., 2003). Educational research (Comer, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Mapp, 2002; Moll, Tapia, & Whitmore, 1993; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Sosa, 1997) and practice point to strong correlations between teachers who understand how to engage in successful partnerships with parents/communities and pupil learning outcomes, such as increased academic achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved motivation, and better school attendance. Yet, despite this growing body of evidence, meaningful partnerships between teachers and parents throughout the United States are rare. Some of the factors contributing to the gap between schools and families include cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences between school personnel and students' families, frequently leading to incorrect assumptions on both sides (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Zuniga & Alva, 1996).

Inquiry Processes: Connecting the Dots

In this article, the voices of professors, school administrators, and students with whom we have worked in a variety of community-based projects for future teachers will be heard. This method of data presentation gives first priority to the perceptions, ideas, and themes which each one of these individuals has contributed. The excerpts from these participants' voices are presented as they were spoken, in multiple settings over a period of seven years. Participants from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), as well as diverse communities in Oklahoma, Florida, and Georgia, together with K-12 school partners and parents describe key impacts of the processes of collaborative planning, implementation, and evaluation of family/community-based projects on schools, families, and the education of future teachers.

Data presented in this article have been collected during research projects conducted with students, families, and communities in both rural and urban settings. One of these initiatives ("Project *Podemos*" conducted by Munter with Girón) has engaged preservice teachers with parents, teachers, and community members in a predominately Hispanic border community. With guidance from Munter and Girón, more than 120 preservice teachers who were engaged in *Podemos* learned how to deepen their understanding and knowledge about how to effectively partner with families from culturally, linguistically diverse backgrounds to support student achievement (Munter, 2003). "Strengthening home-school partnerships for students' biliteracy development in the U.S.-Mexico border," a project conducted by de la Piedra and made possible through the UTEP Teachers for a New Era funding, Project Parent Teacher Educator Connect (FIPSE funded project), and the University Research Incentive grants, is another key project referenced extensively in this article. This

research project sought to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which recent Mexican immigrant and low-income students from the borderlands perceive and use literacies across diverse contexts (home, community, peer group, school) from the "funds of knowledge" model and an ethnographic perspective. Both of these studies took place in a school from the La Colina community. To protect confidentiality, the name "La Colina" is fictitious, as are the names of the participants in this research. We gathered data through individual interviews, students' reflections, journals, and informal oral conversations, as well as observations in our own UTEP classrooms. In both research projects, researchers engaged in careful examination and in-depth inquiry on the processes and outcomes of parent-school relationships in the research sites. Snapshots of students and community members from a third project, conducted by Munter (2000) in a Midwest community, are included to provide the reader with the opportunity to contrast and compare the impacts of this type of project among future teachers (and university professors) whose experiences with diversity are extremely limited. Short- and long-term goals led to application of the new knowledge generated and implications for future teachers' practices (i.e., currently, the co-authors are using the research findings in teacher preparation courses in UTEP's College of Education in order to improve teacher training and question traditional views on parent involvement).

Our findings indicate that there are valuable lessons to be learned from the common themes described by participants in programs linking preservice teachers with Latino (and other recent immigrant) parents and communities across diverse contexts and settings. The article attempts to explore some of the deeper meanings behind the speakers' comments and identify the themes that underlie them, linking them together to clarify the emerging themes and patterns more clearly. To do this, we have grouped excerpts from the unedited narratives so that voices speaking to related topics may be heard together. We include our own voices and reflections in the discussion of these issues. In actuality, the speakers were not all gathered around a table talking about these topics at the same time. To highlight our findings, our discussion will begin on the U.S./Mexico border, at the University of Texas at El Paso.

UTEP and the U.S./Mexico Border Context: Background Colors

The University of Texas at El Paso's (UTEP) College of Education has long recognized the importance of addressing the key role of partnerships in teacher preparation, with particular emphasis on parent involvement. In this U.S./Mexico border community where Hispanics make up a growing majority of the population, educators are acutely aware of the important role of the community and its voice in developing effective educational policy and practice.

One of the school-community-university projects that has been developed in recent years, Project *Podemos* ("We can do it"), builds on the strengths of dynamic, long-term partnerships among the university, public school systems, and the local community. *Podemos* was initiated in fall 2001 with funding from AACTE/MetLife and later extended with FIPSE funding (Project Teacher Educator Connect) to create opportunities for preservice teachers from UTEP to become meaningfully involved in the culture of effective parent-school collaboration. These future teachers have been engaged in a wide variety of activities in local, rural schools where they learn from practical, hands-on experience. The combination of their academic courses and practical experience is embedded in the context of internships in professional development schools (PDS), sites for blending theory and practice with active participation by K-12 teachers, students, parents, administrators, and university professors in preparing future teachers. The PDS team enables preservice teachers to develop habits of inquiry and research skills that help them understand important dimensions of effective schools (Teitel, 2003). A primary goal is that UTEP students be fully involved both as active participants and reflective practitioners, engaged in a learning community that includes parental engagement activities as a component of effective instructional practice. As these preservice teachers reflect collectively on their experiences, they also become engaged in rethinking the nature of the relationship between parents and teachers (Munter, 2003).

The experience of Project *Podemos* has helped college students venture outside of familiar regions of their own communities to learn from and with diverse others. Communities located along the U.S./Mexico border are among the poorest in Texas and the nation. The unemployment rate is twice the state and national average, and per capita income is three times lower than the national rate. More than 32% of El Paso County residents lived in poverty in 2004, up from 27.4% a year earlier (Meritz, 2005); for children the figure is worse. About 41% of the children in El Paso County live in poverty, compared to 23% in Texas and 17% nationwide (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006).

The unincorporated community of La Colina is located in El Paso County, just outside the city limits, and is predominately Spanish-speaking. Nearly 100% of the elementary school students in this district receive free and reduced lunch, and over 65% are recent immigrants (in the U.S. three years or less). There is concern about the rapid growth in these outlying areas, especially in *colonias* (shanty towns), which often lack even the most basic services (i.e., paved roads, water, or sewage).

Notwithstanding the challenges of the low SES and cultural/linguistic diversity of the school's composition, in recent years La Colina's school district has had success in implementing a culturally responsive set of program activities to

eliminate barriers between families and schools throughout the district. Working in collaboration with UTEP, these programs have been designed to create and strengthen bridges between school and community, building strong relationships with parents and community partners (Munter, 2004).

The Emerging Silhouette

The vast majority of all preservice teachers the co-authors have worked with, from varied backgrounds or contexts, have pointed out that they had never before worked in a public school setting with adults of limited formal education background. For example, one of the students we interviewed in a U.S. Midwestern community, Dolores, illustrates the challenges that lie before 21st century education policymakers. In a series of interviews, this student candidly described the deficit perspectives (Valencia, 1997) that had shaped her initial perceptions and attitudes in relation to working with immigrant parents and families (Munter, 2002). After several months of direct interaction in schools and community with immigrant families, this same student cautiously indicates the ways in which the experience of collaborative teaching/learning in the community with immigrant mothers and children can hold the potential for creating opportunities for transformation of these views and beliefs:

> I was kind of surprised at the group of people [parents and community members] that showed up at the school site to work with us…I was expecting them to look like "poverty-stricken immigrants." They all seemed very intelligent, and had good education, really. It was different from what I expected. They were just ordinary people. They were really great…very nice. In fact, even nicer than some people I know!

Reflection on Dolores' responses and reactions to the immigrant community must, however, create a set of concerns and precautionary lessons for teacher educators. This student's "insights" do not really reflect the thoughtful response of a reflective practitioner. While Dolores may have superficially changed her mind about immigrants, describing her understanding of them as changing from "poverty-stricken" and not (formally) educated to becoming "intelligent" and "educated," "ordinary," "great," "very nice," her words also show how difficult it can be to overcome and transform preconceived notions. Careful analysis of this kind of discourse represents the speaker's adherence to the entrenched deficit perspectives on immigrants that characterized her views and beliefs throughout the entire experience. Dolores is trying to measure "immigrants" against the conventional descriptions of "family" and "personhood." She uses the mainstream definition of parenthood as the yardstick for defining

family norms, indicating her unawareness that in this world there are many competing definitions of "good" parenting practices. While mainstream U.S. society tends to value the "cultural capital" (Lareau, 1987) of certain families over others, there are numerous diverse and valid approaches to parenting that need to be considered in any discussion of family life. While initially Dolores' reflective writing may seem to indicate an apparent change, her words need to be unpacked and much more closely examined by educators preparing future teachers to engage effectively in diverse schools and communities.

Clearly then, experiential learning programs like this one have potential to help deepen people's awareness and understanding about diverse others. There are opportunities for students in these projects, for example, to learn about the links of common humanity—the shared devotion to children, commitment to support schools and educational programs—that bind them together with these individuals from diverse cultures, generations, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds in powerful and lasting relationships. However, a cautionary note must be highlighted at this juncture. Many of the future teachers we have worked with resemble Dolores' profile. These college students who have come to the classroom with preconceived notions and fears about crossing boundaries (Giroux, 1992) have a long road to travel as they learn to become more open. In some cases, they have been able, in a relatively short period of time, to see and appreciate the authentic desire on the part of these parents and family members to learn and care for their children's education. However, while this is an important first step in the journey towards perspective transformation, these individuals must be engaged in further reflection and experience to effect real change and transformation (Mezirow, 2000).

In contrast, other students who came into the experience with more awareness, already in touch with their own culture, language, and ethnic identities, described the experience with parents and community members as an encounter with their own family's history (Munter, 2000). Mario, for example, spoke openly of his family's immigration to the U.S., underlining the commonalities shared by these recent immigrants with his own past:

> Yo me puedo relacionar con todo lo que Uds. [los padres de familia] han pasado, porque yo también vine aquí sin saber nada de inglés. Yo estaba en las escuelas sin saber inglés, y fue muy difícil para mí. Había gente que tomó el interés de ayudarme, y yo creo que yo le debo a la comunidad. Yo les debo a todos los hispanos porque yo sé lo que siente él que no sabe el inglés.

> *[I can relate to everything that you (the parents) have been through because I came here too without knowing any English. I was an English language*

learner (ELL) in school, and it was very hard for me. There were some people, though, who took interest in me and helped me and I believe that I am in debt to the community. I owe something to everyone in the Hispanic community—I know how people feel when they don't know English.]

The reactions of students who are attuned to their family history and conscious of their own immigrant backgrounds, such as Mario, point to ways in which social and demographic changes in the U.S. are significantly transforming the landscape of higher education. Students such as this young man can provide many opportunities for building authentic connections among schools, parents, and the next generation of teachers (today's college students). In college classrooms with growing numbers of students like Mario, today's professoriate has unique opportunities to rethink the instructional context for learning, expanding the walls of the classrooms to engage communities and the multiplicity of perspectives on critical issues.

Our experience on the U.S./Mexico border and elsewhere in the nation with students like Mario are further strengthened by findings from recent reports (e.g., Fry, 2003) indicating that the college attendance rate for Hispanics between the ages of 18 and 22 has increased to 35% and their enrollments in undergraduate education have grown by over 200% in the last 25 years. Many are first generation college students and are from low-income communities. Since 1980, the number of Hispanics enrolled in colleges has more than tripled to nearly 1.5 million, outpacing the rate of Hispanic population growth, which has more than doubled to about 38.8 million. Hispanics' share of all bachelor's degrees awarded has more than doubled from about 2.3% to approximately 6.2% (Schmidt, 2003). These "new" college students have the potential to play a valuable role in programs of study for future teachers; as preservice educators, this type of student often engages teacher preparation faculty and staff in reflecting on educators' roles as agents of social change.

Trying Out Different Dimensions

An element of the school-university-community encounter that has enabled these future teachers to develop new perspectives about the critical role of schools in the community has been the growing awareness at higher education institutions of the value of learning from experience. A concern for facilitating students' and others' skills as active participants in, as well as careful observers of, the local community (i.e., learning from experience) is an issue that has received a great deal of attention since the days of Dewey (1916), at least. Visiting groups of people from diverse cultures or even experiencing some aspects of their daily lives is not enough to ensure that learners will develop new

meaning structures or modes of understanding. Students frequently travel or venture out of their familiar territory only to return with a "tourist's" perspective on what they experienced.

The cross-cultural context of learning experiences such as the two projects implemented at UTEP and described here, however, has provided an ideal setting for students to begin to rethink some of their previously held assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes. The opportunity to share in the lived experiences of a school/community with people whose culture, language, and lifestyle differ markedly from one's own, combined with ongoing reflection, has helped to jar students' consciousness. For some, it has provided an opportunity for seeing, tasting, smelling, and hearing a very different interpretation of reality that is literally quite close to home. Learning experiences for adults which take on a transformative character seem to require some variation of this pre-reflective stage of awakening—a disengagement from previously unquestioned perspectives—followed by active involvement and critical reflection (see Kolb, 1984, for further discussion of intellectual growth and development of critical thinking skills through experiential learning).

Preparing for Tomorrow

> Education is about being human…learning how to engage…[and] interact with people…I don't believe that you can do that by simply focusing on the core content areas….The whole point of teacher preparation…is much more powerful… (Henry G., School Principal)

In academic courses of study for future educators, there seem to be few opportunities for students to develop cross-cultural, interpersonal skills. Instruction in the traditional mode is often limited to preparing students for examinations within specific content areas. Partnership programs with parents and communities like the projects described here, by contrast, provide situations for learners to work with parents of diverse backgrounds and learn about themselves in the process.

Teams of students from diverse areas of specialization, working in close collaboration with parents and community members, learn to draw on each other's strengths and expertise to further develop and enhance project activities. Our preliminary findings from multiple contexts and settings suggest that the context for transformative learning for future teachers (Dunlap & Alva, 1999; Mezirow, 2000) is best arranged in a setting which jars the student's awareness, awakening her or him to see that there are "competing cultural definitions of humanity" (Darder, 1995, p. 38) and that there may be more than one lifestyle common to groups of people living in close physical proximity. All

of them are valid and legitimate resources for teaching and learning, although several are frequently silenced by the dominant discourse in mainstream educational research. The new relationships formed in diverse community settings constitute a unique experience for many of our college students, as they learn to listen to others' views and find ways to make sense of diverse viewpoints on critical issues. The community-based project, by its very nature, enables participants to see how truly interdisciplinary authentic problems in the context of community life can be.

Reflection + Action = Praxis

The combination of reflection and action has helped many preservice teachers realize that the theories and principles learned in textbooks or lectures may not always apply to real-world situations. There is much to be learned when the lived experience of family and community members is taken into account in planning and preparing for teaching. Praxis, the interaction between the word and the world, is a fundamental concept in this discussion. Freire (1970) wrote extensively about the role of praxis in education for community development. From this perspective, "there is no theoretic context if it is not in a dialectical unity with the concrete context" (Giroux, 1988, p. 119); education takes place in the real, not the hypothetical, world and involves critical scrutiny of both theory and practice.

Students like Mary point this out in her statement about the impacts of *Podemos* activities on her plans for next steps in her professional career:

> This experience has made me think about how I would incorporate other cultures and different ways of teaching into what I had been thinking of.…It's made me think that maybe the way we thought we should teach isn't necessarily the only right way…One thing I'd like to do is plan on going to the [parents'] homes. If there's a broken toilet—fix it! Help them plant in their garden….That's when you're going to learn the most. When you're sitting in a classroom, it's hard to come up with things because you don't know what their life is like…

Other key stakeholders and participants who talked about the benefits of having opportunities to learn outside of the routine classroom include instructors and professors from academe, many of whom described this teaching/learning modality as one that enlivens the classroom. Their comments indicate that when opportunities to interact with families and communities are integrated into academic courses, students continually bring back new questions and fresh insights, generated through their interactions with the real world outside

of the classroom. Professor Jonas, for example, described the change in his course delivery this way:

> I've taught this course 14 times, and part of what keeps me alive, I'm firmly convinced, is that each semester these 200 (plus or minus) students are doing about 50 different projects in the community—related to what's been done before but never exactly the same. And so, there's a whole set of different questions, and I learn a variety of different things, and different kids in there get turned on about different things. So, I don't have the traditional stack of transparencies—the point of view of my colleagues is, "Oh, you've taught the course 14 times. By now, you must really have the course 'in the can!'" So, I say, "I don't know what you'll think of me, but I don't have a set of transparencies for the course that I just go in and 'do' the course with. I seek to go in and do the course *with* the students who are there."

His colleague, Professor Ben, carried this point further in his discussion of the effects on students preparing for careers in education. To prepare students to interact with children and families professionally, Dr. Ben continues, there is no viable alternative to the direct engagement provided by community-based programs such as *Podemos.* He made this point forcefully when describing the need for fieldwork in the community: "I say to my student teachers, 'How can you understand how to prepare students in your own classrooms for life (which they all agree is one of their goals) if you don't understand what their lives are like?'"

The experience of community-based projects (*Podemos* and others) has provided opportunities for instructors like Professors Jonas and Ben to redesign courses that they have taught from the traditional mode many times in the past. In the following section, de la Piedra describes some of the processes she has engaged in as she implemented an expanded vision for her work with graduate and undergraduate education students on the U.S./Mexico border in the University of Texas at El Paso's College of Education. This section provides the reader with a view from the insider's perspective, as the question and answer format allows the reader to participate in dialogue with de la Piedra, reading about her experiences designing, integrating, and assessing a new vision for literacy and community change within the context of the courses she teaches. Her words on this topic follow here.

Voices from the Field

Professor, what does your perspective on community-school relationships with future teachers mean in terms of the processes of developing course syllabi and classroom practice?

I have been very careful to design each of my courses so that they are not divorced from the ideologies that exist in society about language and culture in relation to literacy/biliteracy development. Those teachers and future teachers in my classes who grew up in underserved communities on the U.S./Mexico border have reminded me of the consequences of dominant ideologies as we have each shared our life stories and personal experiences in schools. Numerous stories of frustration, embarrassment, and negative experiences have filled the lives of these future educators, many of whom are Mexican immigrants or children of immigrants themselves. Most of my students have succeeded in their lives and careers, moving beyond the consequences of deficit perspectives about Latinos, as well as linguistic and cultural discrimination. Through our reflective dialogues, I have learned that many of these individuals represent cases of resiliency and resistance. As I often tell them, they have an important role as future teachers of Spanish-speaking and other immigrant students, because their own lives mirror many of the schooling experiences of these children; as future educators, these women and men have developed deep insights into the challenges and possibilities that lie ahead for educational researchers and practitioners in today's schools.

Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari (2003) summarize my own perspective on literacy education: "[W]hat educators need to understand is that they cannot isolate phoneme-grapheme awareness from factors of social class and cultural identity which ultimately shape such awareness" (p. 75). I would like to situate my discussion of how to introduce the issue of home-community relationships within this critical view of teacher education.

The courses I teach begin from an ideological framework (Street, 1984), which tells us that literacy does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it occurs in a social and cultural context where linguistic ideologies influence the ways we teach reading and writing. Thus, a main goal is that preservice teachers develop an understanding of their role(s) within the educational system where ideologies exist and reproduce practices accordingly. It is very important in the context of border communities (like El Paso/Juárez), to uncover the inherent contradictions of *English-Only* ideologies and practices, as well as the reproduction of pedagogies that rarely take into account home and community native languages and literacies. In addition, it is extremely important to engage future teachers in dialogue around critical issues about foundational constructs that can empower communities; in my classes, a key topic has been the notion that schools are sites of social struggle and possibilities of resistance. Within this broader framework, we discuss teachers' roles as agents of social reproduction or resistance and change. By situating my work within the context of school-community relationships and biliteracy, I have come to realize that living and

teaching on the U.S./Mexico border, local community members (including my own students) and their life stories frequently constitute the best teaching tool for discussion and conceptualization of new ways of interacting with parents.

Why incorporate the topic of parent involvement in language and literacy teacher education?

My goal when incorporating parental involvement in literacy/biliteracy development is that future teachers (from the borderlands or elsewhere) will be able to go beyond understanding the importance of technical meetings with parents. The challenge is to elaborate and reflect on the new roles teachers and schools can take when relating to parents. Teachers and schools may choose to approach parents from an attitude of "experts" whose role it is to provide families with what they lack (e.g., knowledge about how to read to their own children), or alternatively, they may decide to approach parents as knowledgeable people, with values and wisdom that can genuinely contribute to the processes of their children's development of language and literacy skills. The goal of my classes is to build on the latter.

Literature on the benefits of parental involvement for pupils' successful educational performance is abundant (e.g., Clark, 2002; Lareau, 2000; Scribner et al., 1999; Shumow & Miller, 2001). Research has shown that parents exert a significant influence in their children's school experience, preventing drop-out behaviors (Dornbush, Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, & Ritter, 1990; Romo & Falbo, 1996), determining academic placement (Shumow & Miller) and enhancing academic performance measured by standardized test scores (Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). Clearly, educational researchers and practitioners concur in viewing parental involvement as key to the successful educational experience of children.

However, myths about minority families' lack of interest in their children's schooling have been prevalent in the discourse about school-home collaboration, and in recent years critical scholars have conducted notable research studies critiquing the deception and misinformation about non-mainstream families, providing conclusive evidence that minority and low-income parents are deeply interested and connected to their children's education (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese, 2005; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Trueba, 1999; Valdés, 1996). Parents from minority and working-class families, however, may not involve themselves according to mainstream school personnel's expectations (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Lareau, 2000; Pérez Carreón et al.; Valdés), contributing to school authorities' misinterpretation of different types of involvement as lack of interest or indifference to children's education.

Minority parents may have a particular definition of their engagement with their children's education. Providing for the family, teaching *respeto* (respect) and *confianza* (trust), keeping the unity of the family, and being a good example are ways in which parents defined their own engagement in their children's *educación* (formal and informal education; de la Piedra, 1998; Valdés, 1996).

Minority parents often do not feel comfortable with school staff and regulations (Griego Jones & Fuller, 2003). For example, an immigrant woman, Verónica Meza, whom I interviewed recently about her experiences in her daughter's school, told me she felt mistreated and that the school did not communicate with her about what was happening with her daughter. She told me that she depended on her sister-in-law to communicate with the school in English because she does not speak the language. When I asked her if the school personnel did not speak Spanish, she answered:

> Sí me entienden pero me quedé traumatizada cuando inscribimos a Claudia. Nos recibió una maestra y muy déspota no me dio los papeles. Traía yo todo el papeleo de Claudia, y llegó mi cuñada y dice (en inglés) "vinimos a inscribir a la niña…" "¡Ay! Estoy muy ocupada señora, espérese." Ahí nos quedamos nosotros y dije yo "¡Ay canijo!", siempre me habían tratado bien, en Denver nos trataron bien bonito (…) *So*, empezó a hablar en inglés, inglés y mi cuñada también, y no vio los papeles, nos mandó a la oficina….Se burló de mi firma, se burló de nosotros. Mi cuñada se enojó. Le habló en inglés y yo me quedé. Dijo "¿no sabe inglés?" "No sé." No me gustó, realmente no me gustó, y dijo Claudia: "¡Ay mamá! Esta escuela está muy fea."
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> *[Yes, they understand me but I was traumatized when we went to that school to enroll Claudia in her classes. We were greeted by a teacher who was very arrogant and she didn't give me the paperwork. I had brought all of Claudia's documents with me that day, and my sister-in-law came and said (in English), "We're here to enroll our child." "Well, I am very busy right now. You'll have to wait." So, we stayed there and I started to think, "Wow! They always used to treat me nicely in Denver…" Then she started talking in English and so did my sister-in-law. She sent us to the office where she made fun of my signature and she was making fun of all of us. My sister-in-law became quite angry. She spoke to her in English and I was just sitting there. She said to me, "Do you know any English?" "No, I don't." I didn't feel good there, I really didn't like it. Even Claudia said, "Oh, mom! I don't like this school!"]*

These words speak volumes about the feelings of Mexican immigrant parents on the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as many of my students' parents and my students (border residents) themselves. Verónica and her daughter Claudia did not feel comfortable in the school. Verónica was ignored because she

did not speak English. She had no option but to rely on her sister-in-law. That would not be a problem by itself, since she relied on her sister-in-law to do many things in English. However, her feelings of discomfort were compounded because the teacher talked down to her, making fun of her signature and disrespecting her family. Like Verónica, other immigrant parents feel out of place, misunderstood, and mistreated at school, thus they are not motivated to participate actively in school activities (Ramirez, 2003; Valdés, 1996).

Delgado-Gaitan (2001) holds that much of the research on children's education within the family has been derogatory towards working-class and minority parents. They have been measured and compared with middle-class Anglo parents, whose parenting strategies have been characterized as "more effective" ways of parenting than working-class and minority parenting styles by mainstream scholars and school authorities (see Nieto, 2002; Oakes, 1985; Valenzuela, 1999, for further discussion of the impacts of school policies/practices).

Valdés (1996) argues that many U.S. educators believe immigrant (and other diverse) parents are not supportive of their children, because most teachers have been raised within middle-class, Eurocentric traditions. The teachers frequently have a narrow understanding of the rich, multilayered family lives of children of Mexican immigrants. Valdés reported, "[teachers'] vision of [ideal] home life includes a view of standard or typical middle-class family—reflected in Lareau (2000)—in which parents spend the evening gathered around their children's homework" (p. 191). Thus, schools tend to describe a "standard" family in terms of the middle-class, Eurocentric image, in a perspective related to a deficit view of immigrant parents' relationships with formal education, especially working-class parents. Teaching my courses, I have realized that this misperception is often internalized even in the case of teachers that were born and raised as children of immigrants here in the U.S./Mexico borderlands. Statements such as "Parents do not care about education," "they leave their children at school as if it was a daycare center," or "they do not read with their children" are not uncommon in frank dialogue sessions about schooling.

In her review of the historical variations of the definitions of family-school relationships, Lareau (1987) argues that these designations have undergone processes of change, and only recently have U.S. parents been expected to support the curriculum, stimulate their children's cognitive development at home, and participate in the classroom. Thus, the expectations of parental involvement that we have today are socially constructed and variable; there are many possible types of school-home relationships. Furthermore, Lareau's (2000) research found that both middle-class and working-class communities wanted their children to succeed in school and both believed that having a partnership with the school was important. However, more affluent and educated parents

were able to assure the advantages of their children by using social and cultural resources, while working-class parents did not have the cultural capital promoted by the school and they viewed school and family as two separated spheres.

Within the context of this discussion, there is a great need to think beyond the traditional paradigms of parental involvement in children's literacy development through story-reading practice to consider a broader framework for home-school relationships that rely on the culture and life experiences of the families (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Kelly et al., 2001; Nistler & Maiers, 1999; Osterling, 2001). Delgado-Gaitan (1990) for example, found that even though parents may not participate in the ways U.S. schools expect them to, they have other ways of assisting with the education of their children. She observed activities related to literacy in the home and identified different ways of supporting literacy development, such as oral storytelling and writing letters to relatives in the family's country of origin. de la Piedra and Romo (2003) found a similar situation. They conducted a case study of one Mexican family's literacy practices at home. They found that the mother and older sisters took roles of literacy mediators during literacy events when they introduced an 18-month old youngest sister to basic print knowledge and the English language by utilizing Spanish, pictures, and frames of reference familiar to the baby.

Scholarship based on a sociocultural theory of learning focuses on the resources that families provide for their children and points to the funds of knowledge (Velez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992) that families transmit to their children as valuable resources that can be used in the everyday instruction in the classroom (Gonzales et al., 1995; McIntyre, et al., 2001; Moll et al., 1993). Funds of knowledge are the cultural and material resources that families and communities distribute among their members. People draw from these cultural tools in order to solve the problems encountered during everyday life.

I consider literacies (Street, 1984) to be a part of the funds of knowledge that are exchanged and flow among households. This framework provides educators with a new way of looking at the relationship between the school and the community. Underlying this approach is the realization that parents and other members of children's social networks have valuable resources that can be used for intellectual and academic purposes. Furthermore, children and their families are involved in social relationships. In other words, these could be valued and utilized by teachers and schools as the social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that children possess.

How do we transform dominant perceptions and practices towards Mexican families from the borderlands? How do we transform dominant definitions of school knowledge and literacy? I believe that lessons learned with future educators and communities on the U.S./Mexico border provide opportunities for

deepening the current knowledge base about these critical issues. In communities like El Paso/Juárez, a growing number of preservice teachers are members of the same culturally/linguistically diverse communities in which the schools' diverse children live and learn. Thus, these beginning teachers are able to understand the concept of funds of knowledge through critical reflection on their own lives and families as examples.

How do you implement these theories in your teacher education classes?

Let me briefly explain to you how I engage my students in working with the topic of parent and "community expert" engagement as part of the process of biliteracy development. Obviously, parents and community experts are direct resources for the maintenance and development of the oral and written native language (Spanish or other languages). The following are some activities I have used that have helped students to develop new insights and understanding about this important topic:

1. Brainstorming preconceived ideas and beliefs about parents in schools that students bring with them, with a focus on uncovering future teachers' (often unconscious) deficit perspectives about Mexican immigrant families. At this point, we reflect on dominant discourses about parents.
2. Moving from students' beliefs about learners' bilingual, biliterate skills and immigrant home communities as "barriers to learning" to re-conceptualizing two (or more) languages, home cultures, and community resources as "resources for learning."
3. Collecting oral history projects in the students' home communities: This activity enables students to more clearly see the connections between funds of knowledge in the households and activities in the classroom by using oral narrative as text to develop bilingual and biliterate skills.
4. Asking the students to identify "experts in the community." They think about their own communities as they were growing up or the communities in which they currently live.

Having implemented these activities now several times, I have been able to establish three categories of experts that students/teachers may find in their own local communities:

a. Writers in the community: Students see journalists in the news and the writers that work with them, including local authors and poets who write in Spanish and English, many of whom are bilingual and biliterate. Some of these writers use code-switching in their published work, which validates the everyday use of language in the community.
b. Experts in storytelling: Students are familiar with elders from the community (often their own grandparents, uncles, aunts, fathers, and mothers) who are experienced storytellers. We explore the potential of these

narrative texts as oral literature and as tools that help children and adults to make sense of cultural experience. Students have concluded that these are pedagogical tools that adults in our communities use in order to socialize children into cultural norms. In addition, storytelling is an important way to share information about identity and survival strategies of the households. Grandparents' or parents' stories of immigration or their participation in the Mexican revolution are frequent topics of our discussion. Students are able to see these as resources to affirm children's identities and enhance learning in the classroom.

c. Other experts from the community: In my class, we continually locate local experts who address a wide variety of topics and serve as sources of information and knowledge for children. Students are able to think and write about their parents' and neighbors' professional skills and knowledge (e.g., construction workers, cooks, farmers, auto mechanics, and musicians) as part of the process of their own biliteracy development.

Through these processes, students have come to understand the importance of conceptualizing parents, relatives, and other community members as "experts." We have discussed the diverse cultural ways of knowing and how these are resources that can be utilized in the classroom for the purpose of biliteracy development. The stories students collect in their own families have been powerful tools to exemplify the funds of knowledge and pedagogical tools that families possess. Preservice teachers frequently have been able to see in their own families the richness of storytelling. We have had oral stories recorded, written, and sent via e-mail. Sharing stories of their families provided these students with an opportunity to express affection and present their histories and identities. They understood the significance of doing the same with their students, within the context of the discussion of the funds of knowledge model. We have discussed the home-school partnership concept, whereby teachers and parents create a more horizontal relationship to support each other and parents are viewed as "experts."

The goals of this approach include enabling future teachers to understand that education "should be rooted in the cultural capital of subordinate groups, and have at its point of departure their own language….Educators must develop radical pedagogical approaches that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis for literacy, including, obviously, the language [and literacies] they bring to the classroom" (Macedo et al., 2003, p. 82).

In the context of La Colina, school principal Henry G. reminds us that

It is our responsibility as professionals to create an environment where we reach out to parents and to community members and give them opportunities to engage with the school. The student teacher experience needs

to be such that they see the value of that. They need to understand how to get a parent to be on their side…if you really truly deeply believe it as an individual, then there's no other avenue. There are different ways you can reach out, but there's no doubt in my mind that you have to do it.

The Bigger Picture: Expanding the Learning Environment

For many of the future teachers whose words are included here, the interaction with parents and schools has enabled them to get a sense of the larger context in which we all live. Their experiences in the field enlarged the dimensions of their learning environment, allowing many to see their own roles in society in a different perspective. In their experience as students, these young adults had seen very little beyond the university campus. The interactions with diverse groups of people in the community have helped them see overlapping boundaries and strong connections between the real world all around them and their experience as students.

More than 65 years ago, Dewey (1938) described the problems of traditional education programs that teach subject matter in isolation, disconnected from the rest of experience. He wrote that this kind of learning fails to give genuine preparation to learners, no matter how thoroughly ingrained at the time. The type of experience provided by the projects presented here, in contrast, seems to create a new learning environment, one which complements the conventional academic experience. Learners' vision changes as their interactions in the field allow them to see other people's realities through new lenses. The entire community with all its resources and people becomes part of a collective educational enterprise. Students bring new questions and fresh insights to the classroom from their varied field experiences and dialogical interactions with parents. Often their reports generate new insights and understanding about issues confronting society today. Many also develop a new appreciation of their own and their families' gifts, talents, and life experiences. Students' recognition that they have a real opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children and families from diverse backgrounds has been a key element in their developing vision of the roles they will play as active agents of change in society.

The classroom that this model envisions extends the boundaries of the "ivory tower" into the community and blurs the distinctions that traditionally separate teachers from learners and universities from the communities in which they are embedded. In this model, learning is an authentic process—theories are generated in the context of the real world. Future growth and development of this methodology in higher education presages a paradigmatic shift for faculty, administrators, and policymakers who have held to the traditional model of the "neutral" educational program.

This approach to teacher preparation presupposes an ethical commitment, a stance which sees that avoiding the controversy inherent in alternative perspectives is taking a stand that favors the status quo. An essential component of the model includes the identification of community needs and assets through university faculty members and students working together with the community to identify sources of oppression and injustice in society and to search for solutions to authentic social problems.

In the case of schools that are embedded in multilingual, multicultural communities, there is an even greater urgency to link public schools with families, local institutions, and communities (Nieto, 2002; Pang, 2001). The culture inside of most public schools in America today (i.e., authority structures, curriculum, textbooks, testing practices) tends to exemplify the values and norms of middle-class U.S. family backgrounds based on Eurocentric culture, history, traditions, and values. Thus, children from different cultural backgrounds are often at a distinct social and academic disadvantage in most American schools. Many of the unique skills and characteristics associated with being raised in a particular cultural context have important implications for instruction and daily routines in school. For those teachers who are unaware of the cultural capital possessed by the multilingual, ethnically diverse children in today's schoolroom, parents and community can be a vital resource.

Integration of parents and community into courses and programs of study is a key value, shared by school, community, and university partners engaged in the process. Henry G., school principal, described his values and beliefs in relation to the school, family, and community in which he was raised and where he works today, summarizing the links and connections that have resulted over the years from working with future teachers through the *Podemos* experience:

> …[M]y work with preservice teachers, parents, and children is based on my values, beliefs…and my own education…[M]y dad called it *"atando cabitos"*…[that is,] creating or connecting links, so that you're creating a chain of events that are interconnected…related one to each other. As you're creating links, the connections are not always linear. [Y]ou're creating a fabric, a process…I really think that we go through life and we reach a level of awareness because of experiences, because other people have opened our eyes to possibilities….All of these experiences can…create that sense of mission or desire to do things differently and make changes. It's up to us to expose tomorrow's teachers to these experiences….
>
> (Henry G., La Colina School Principal)

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Endnote

*Over four dozen different individual and focus group reflections are included in the collection of students', instructors', parents', and school administrators' essays/interview transcripts. We have deleted names and other personal descriptions to prevent identification of individuals, and restricted our use of written work and transcripts to those individuals from whom we obtained permission. All specific references to particular schools and community sites have been excluded as well.

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