

# Parents *Don't* Do Nothing: Reconceptualizing Parental Null Actions as Agency

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## Abstract

This paper presents findings from a larger study that examined the roles that parents and caregivers are given and/or choose to enact to support their children's mathematics learning, particularly in relation to their children's math homework. Based on interviews with parents of elementary-age children from three different urban school districts in the northeastern United States, we propose a conceptualization of parental engagement that uses a framework of human agency to understand both beliefs and rationales underlying parental actions as well as the apparent lack of actions. Our findings identify challenges parents encounter in relation to their children's school mathematics and reveal the limits of school-centered conceptions of parental engagement.

Key words: parental engagement, homework, parents, agency, learning, elementary schools, mathematics, null actions, urban, involvement, perceptions

## Introduction

Attempts to support and improve the learning and performance of American children in mathematics, and in particular the mathematics education of children in traditionally underserved urban environments, have looked to curriculum, assessment, teacher education, and even to the home. Parents are increasingly viewed as "an untapped resource for improving the mathematics performance of American children" (Hyde et al., 2006, p. 136), and research

suggests that there is a relationship between parent involvement and improvements in student achievement and outcomes (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Acknowledging research that frames parents as potential resources or partners in student learning, even textbook publishers have developed curriculum-related instructional materials to go beyond the school walls—to the home. This study examined parents' involvement in their children's homework as a lens through which to understand parents' engagement with their children's math learning. (Note: In this paper, we use the term parent to refer to the child's primary caregiver, most frequently a mother or grandmother.)

From curriculum materials to government and district policies which try to promote parent involvement, an implicit, and at times explicit, vision of what parent involvement ought to look like and of what counts as parent involvement emerges (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). This conception of parental involvement typically revolves around school-prescribed behaviors in which parents are encouraged to engage rather than interactions generated and directed by parents. Despite efforts on the part of advocates for more egalitarian home-school relationships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, 2008), the prevailing picture of effective parent involvement which still dominates in many urban schools evokes concomitant images of disengaged parents and ineffective parent involvement. Lightfoot (2004) has described the language centering on parental involvement in urban schools as carrying an implicit "discourse of deficit" that shapes the perceptions of parents and their involvement.

Within the mathematics education community, many researchers have worked to establish frameworks for examining parental roles in children's learning and schooling that challenge the traditional, school-centric assumptions about what constitutes effective and appropriate parental involvement. In their work with Latino families, Civil and Bernier (2006) countered the deficit view and low expectations of minority families and students by positioning parents as intellectual resources (see also Anhalt, Allexaht-Snyder, & Civil, 2002). Remillard and Jackson (2006) illuminated the questions and challenges African American parents in a low-income neighborhood experienced as they encountered reform-mathematics curricula through their children's schoolwork. While the parents viewed themselves as critical players in their children's learning, they had little understanding of the reform-oriented curricular approaches, which influenced (and at times limited) how and when they engaged with their children's school mathematics. Martin (2006) critically examined parental involvement within a sociohistorical context, noting that efforts to promote certain parental behaviors rendered others invisible or less valuable. Sharply underscoring the assumptions underlying calls for increased parental involvement, Martin observed,

The practices and behaviors that are idealized—for example, volunteering in schools and classrooms, helping students with homework, fundraising—are those against which all parents are judged. What is not discussed or conceptualized is the fact that agency for many African American parents can take alternative forms and may or may not involve direct involvement in the school context. (2006, p. 216)

Expanding the possibilities of what counts as parent involvement, Calabrese Barton and colleagues (2004) presented an ecological model of parent engagement in urban education that sought to capture how parents understand “the hows and whys” of their interactions with schools. They asserted that this perspective

is particularly relevant for understanding parental engagement in high-poverty urban schools for it uncovers how parents activate non-traditional resources and leverage relationships with teachers, other parents, and community members in order to author a place of their own in schools. (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004, p. 11)

Despite the differences in focus, the aforementioned research efforts share a common thread: rethinking the role of parents in children’s math learning by understanding the vantage point of the home rather than the school.

This study builds on the research that has sought to broaden understandings not only of *how* parents are involved in their children’s learning at home, but also of the rationales underlying their decisions and their actions (Civil & Bernier, 2006; Martin, 2006; Remillard & Jackson, 2006). In questioning commonly held assumptions about what constitutes parental engagement in children’s schooling, we hoped to illuminate the multifaceted way in which urban parents from diverse backgrounds exercise their agency in support of their goals for their children’s learning.

### **Parental Involvement in the Context of Math Education Reform**

The *Principles and Standards of School Mathematics* (“Standards”) proposed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2000) outlined a vision of mathematics education reform that challenges long-held assumptions about the nature of mathematics, how mathematics is learned, and how it is effectively taught. Emphasizing access and equity for all students of math, the *Standards* called for mathematics education to support problem solving, reasoning, communication, and connections, so that all students learn math not only with procedural competency but also relational understanding. Drawing on research on how mathematical learning develops, the *Standards* outlined new ideas of what constitutes the math that students should learn and how they

should encounter this material. *Everyday Mathematics* (University of Chicago School Mathematics Project [UCSMP], 2001) is one example of a reform-oriented curriculum developed to implement these ideals and is widely used in urban districts. It includes an extensive component directed to and for parents in its printed materials.

The role of parents, however, in relation to mathematics education reform is less clear. Peressini (1998), for example, noted that much of the research on mathematics education reform “characterizes parents as obstacles to school mathematics reform and positions them at the margins of mathematics education” (p. 559). While certain actions of parental engagement are aligned with school and reform goals, such as checking homework and encouraging children to explain their thinking or use multiple approaches to solve problems, these actions are often fostered by teachers, schools, and curricula in ways that do not take into account parents’ voices, beliefs, and expectations of what mathematics learning looks like.

This study examined parents’ perceptions and understandings of math homework and their role in supporting their children’s mathematics learning. We contend that parent actions, including those which may be perceived as suggesting a lack of engagement, are intentional and purposeful. While certain acts of engagement may align with teacher, school, and curricular expectations, we suggest that other acts that may cause parents to be perceived by practitioners and researchers as uninvolved or disengaged are in fact reasoned and concordant with parental goals for their children’s learning. We maintain that both are acts of parental agency in support of children’s math learning.

## Methods

The data analyzed for this paper came from a larger Mathematics Homework Connections study that used qualitative research methods to understand the role of caregivers in the mathematics learning of children in underserved urban communities. This study was conducted in schools in three urban school districts in the Northeastern United States. To understand the perspectives of different stakeholders, administrators, teachers, and parents have been interviewed, and teachers’ classes have been observed multiple times. Data collection and analysis methods are structured to provide evidence about how teachers and parents interpret, experience, and respond to the *Everyday Mathematics* (UCSMP, 2001) curriculum and its components oriented towards the home to promote parental engagement in children’s math learning.

In this paper, we drew from interviews with 18 parents whose children attend three schools in the three different urban school districts (see Table 1;

please note that all names of participants and schools are pseudonyms). The schools typically served low-income, minority student populations, though at one school, a charter school, the population was more diverse in terms of parents’ educational levels. Seventeen of the parents interviewed were African American or Latina women; one was a White woman. All parents self-selected to participate in the study in response to a flier that was sent home with children in second, third, and fourth grade (and one combined fourth/fifth grade class). Parents were asked to return the form so that a researcher could contact them for an interview. All interviews were conducted individually, in person, and recorded in English or Spanish according to the parent’s preference. Interviews averaged one hour in length. The interviews were semi-structured, and questions focused on the parent’s views, experiences, and involvement in their child’s math homework and overall schooling.

Table 1. Research Participants, Districts, and Schools

District # 1	District # 2	District # 3
Sycamore Charter School (SCS)	Whitman Elementary School	King Elementary School
Ms. Demond (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	Ms. Smith-Sanders (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	Ms. Rivera* (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)
Ms. Ingram (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	Ms. Washington (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	Ms. Esteves* (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)
Ms. Jansen (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)	Ms. Garcia* (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	Ms. Rosales* (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)
Ms. Nichols (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)	Ms. Knight (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	Ms. Almonte* (4 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Ms. Keller (4 <sup>th</sup> grade)	Ms. Davis (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)	Ms. Marose (4 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Ms. Jacobs (4 <sup>th</sup> grade)	Ms. Decker (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)	Ms. Santos* (5 <sup>th</sup> Grade)

\* Interviews conducted in Spanish

Note: All schools and participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Our data analysis process involved reading through all parent interviews to identify salient themes and generate emergent codes. Then, interview transcripts were coded by at least two readers for examples of parental acts of agency and for factors influencing parental decisions on when and how to act.

The research team that collected and analyzed this data was composed of a diverse group of more than a dozen researchers that spanned three universities located in three different cities. We represented a range of different ages and experience levels from twenty-something graduate students to tenured faculty in their fifties. We came from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds including White, African American, Latina, and Asian. Our team included men and women, parents and non-parents, and represented a variety of disciplinary perspectives including pure mathematics, education, and urban studies.

Though, of course, we invariably brought our different subjectivities to the research, we believe that the diversity of our research team and the fact that all data were analyzed by multiple researchers helped to ameliorate any potential biases and worked to strengthen the validity of the findings that are presented in this article.

## **Human Agency as a Perspective on Parent Involvement**

We see the notion of human agency as a critical component to an alternative formulation of parental involvement in children's mathematics learning. In this paper, we draw from Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Like Giroux (1983), we believe the concept of human agency helps us "to understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint" (p. 108). Agency as a theoretical term helps us to balance the extremes of structural determinism and unconstrained volition in order to understand human action.

We believe parents make intentional decisions about the interactions in which they will engage with their children and with school personnel (teachers, administrators) around issues in school mathematics. We define parental agency as intentional goal-directed behavior and use the word agency to demonstrate that "within the constraints of their world, people are planful and make choices among options that construct their life course" (Clausen, 1993 in Elder, 1994, p. 6). Thus, human agency is the intentional action of human beings seeking to fulfill meaningful purposes. From a theoretical perspective, the question for us is not whether, in a given situation, human actors display agency but rather *how* and *why* agency is expressed and what contributes to that expression. Consequently an understanding of parental agency requires more than simply noting what parents do or don't do in a particular situation. It requires grasping the interests, goals, and purposes of parents' actions in the particular contexts of the schooling of their children. This paper explores how urban parents both envision and exercise their agency to support their children's math learning. We examine the variety and complexity of parental beliefs and perceptions that motivate the exercising of agency as well as the actions themselves.

### **Reading Parental Explicit Actions as Agency**

The agency of parental explicit action is consistent with much of the existing literature on parental involvement which focuses on understanding "parents' motivation for involvement in homework, the content of their involvement,

the mechanisms through which their involvement appears to influence student outcomes, and the consequences of their involvement” (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 195). Explicit actions of parental involvement include establishing structures (physical, temporal, emotional) for homework, interacting with the school or teacher around homework, providing oversight to the homework process, and engaging in homework tasks with children. Consistent with this literature, our data show clear and explicit examples of parental agency in support of children’s math learning. In this sense the agency model coheres with the conventional picture of active and effective parental involvement in children’s education, though it is important to note that not all examples of explicit actions were visible to or recognized by school personnel. Nonetheless, based on both research and policy recommendations for school-directed modes of parent involvement, we can assume that these parental acts would meet with approval. Our data, however, led us to examine more closely those cases in which parents appear to be uninvolved or inactive, according to traditional, school-centric definitions of parent involvement.

### Reading Parental Null Actions as Agency

We propose the notion of null actions as a descriptive and explanatory concept to help us understand parent agency. A null action is not synonymous with parents doing nothing or being disinterested or disengaged in their children’s learning. Rather, *we see null actions as expressions of agency that reflect specific parental interests and intentions that lie behind an apparent absence of parental action*—particularly those that might be expected or desired by school personnel—in a given situation. In this study, we found that parental null actions result in two very specific circumstances. Parents sometimes choose null actions in an effort to affect self-reliance strategies in their children. Parents make the purposeful choice to *not* intervene in certain aspects of their children’s schooling to encourage their children to become self-reliant learners. We also found that null actions are often engaged in response to perceived impediments to the interests and goals that parents hold for their children. These parents choose not to engage in explicit actions on behalf of their children because they believe that their actions would not achieve their goals. These parents perceive the barriers they face to be of sufficient strength to overwhelm certain courses of explicit action, and thus they opt to engage in null action.

It is important to note that most parents in our study did not engage exclusively in explicit or null actions. Rather, most engaged in both at different times, depending upon the circumstances (see Table 2, which displays our research participants’ null and explicit actions). We believe that this crossing over from explicit to null action and back again on the part of our research participants

confirms our assertion that these are not passive or disengaged parents. Rather they are making purposeful choices about when to activate their agency, and in which ways, depending upon the circumstances and their intentions for their children. The agency perspective suggests that what is conventionally perceived as disinterest or disengagement on the part of urban parents may be re/conceived and re/interpreted when one looks more closely into the parents' beliefs, interests, and goals.

Table 2. Explicit and Null Parental Actions

Parent (Child's grade)		Categories of Parental Actions Around Math Homework			
		Explicit Actions	Null Actions: <i>To Foster Self-Reliance</i>	Null Actions: <i>Response to Challenges/ Curriculum</i>	Null Actions: <i>Response to Language Barrier</i>
Sycamore	Ms. Demond (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓	✓ (+)	✓	
	Ms. Ingram (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓ (+)		✓	
	Ms. Jansen (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	✓		✓ (+)	
	Ms. Nichols (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	✓	✓ (+)		
	Ms. Keller (4 <sup>th</sup> )	✓	✓	✓ (+)	
	Ms. Jacobs (4 <sup>th</sup> )	✓ (+)	✓		
Whitman	Ms. Smith Sanders (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓			
	Ms. Washington (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓ (+)	✓	✓	
	Ms. Knight (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓	✓		
	Ms. Garcia (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓		✓	✓
	Ms. Decker (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	✓ (+)	✓	✓	
	Ms. Davis (3 <sup>rd</sup> )				
King	Ms. Rivera (2 <sup>nd</sup> )			✓	✓ (+)
	Ms. Estevez (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	✓	✓	✓	✓ (+)
	Ms. Rosales (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	✓		✓	✓ (+)
	Ms. Marose (4 <sup>th</sup> )				
	Ms. Almonte (4 <sup>th</sup> )	✓	✓		
	Ms. Santos (5 <sup>th</sup> )				✓ (+)

(+) most of the references were in this category, though others were also mentioned

### Parental Explicit Actions

The parents who participated in our study supported their children's math homework and learning in a range of ways that fit with traditional conceptions



of what constitutes effective parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Many parents set up routines which enabled their children to do their math homework. They created both a time and space in which their children completed their homework and positioned themselves nearby in case they were needed. Ms. Keller explained:

When I start preparing their dinner, then that's when it's kinda homework time. So we're normally in the kitchen. They're sitting at the counter, and Scott's at this counter doing his homework, and I'm cooking, and then that way if he needs my help I kind of just look over and help him, and then, that kind of thing. (SCS, 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Other parents felt that it was best to sit with their children as they did homework. These parents actively participated in their children's math homework, helping them to read and understand problems and aiding them in developing strategies for solving them. Ms. Ingram described how she worked with her second grader on work with numbers and number sense:

He had a lot of number sequences. Like, he would count by 10s. With 66, 76, 86. He was used to counting by 10s at 10, 20, 30, 40. So I really had to pay attention to make sure he sees the pattern. You can count by 10s a lot of ways. You could do it with 2, 12. You know?...You can go on and on and on where every number ends in 2, you know. And so, that was one project that I would help him with, and he would see it, but I had to bring it out to him, although he learned it earlier that day. (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Other parents may not have participated in *doing* homework with their children, but they consistently monitored the homework process. For some parents this involved checking that a child had completed her homework, for others it included determining that the homework answers were correct, and for a few, like Ms. Washington, it also included reviewing the homework when it was returned by the child's teacher:

My daughter do all her homework, bring it back to me, I look it over and [check] if there's something wrong. I got to do that for her and my first grader. Sometimes I got to do that, well, not even sometimes, I do that every time for her. She go and do her homework, and I say, bring it back to me, and I check it after it's finished. (Whitman, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Many parents engaged in ongoing communication with their children's teachers and other school staff as a way to support their children's math learning. For some parents, those who lived within close proximity to their children's school and had the time, this involved frequent, informal visits to the school.

For others this communication most commonly took the form of notes sent in with their children in reference to a difficulty with the math homework.

I make my appearance about three days out the week, maybe sometimes about four depending how they've been the couple days before. But I try to make my appearance about three days out the week...I talk to the principal, I talk to the teachers, I talk to the resource teacher; I talk to everyone before I leave. (Ms. Decker, Whitman, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Ms. Santos, a parent with limited English language proficiency, strove for direct and personal communication with her child's teacher and other school personnel, explaining that whenever she has a question or problem, "I come personally and talk to the person" (King, 5<sup>th</sup> grade).

Other parents expressed their engagement by familiarizing themselves with the school's and teacher's homework policies and practices. Some were aware of these policies because they had attended school-sponsored events such as Open School Night or regularly read the information teachers sent home. Others, like Ms. Decker, went out of their way to ask their children's teachers directly about homework policies and expectations:

They're supposed to have homework every night, I know that. I asked. I asked all the teachers, you know, each class that they be in. "Is homework mandatory? Every night, you know what I'm saying?" They said it should take no longer than ten or fifteen minutes the majority of the nights. I try to keep up on all of that. (Whitman, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Some parents, especially those who felt that their own math knowledge limited their ability to help their children with math homework, made sure to enlist the teacher's active help. Ms. Decker described her strategy for getting the teacher to help her child with his math homework:

I think we make it a tag team, like I said before, between myself and his teacher, so if he hits a snag then we try to get on top of it as soon as possible. Even if he comes home and he still don't understand it after I explain it to him, then I make sure he be here bright and early in the morning so he can eat his breakfast and she can, you know, go over it with him on the one on one until it's time for school. (Whitman, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Other parents sent notes or email to their children's teacher indicating they were unable to assist their children with the math homework and asking for the teacher's intervention. Ms. Ingram explained, "I would write a note. 'Please correct.' Or, 'Tell us the correct way' if I couldn't get it." She elaborated,

I make sure I consult with his teacher. Because not only is he stuck, I'm like, clueless. So, we want to *know*. Because, you know, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, that's

gonna come up, 4<sup>th</sup> grade it's gonna come up, and I don't want him to miss it in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Many parents engaged a wide network of family and friends to assist their children with math homework if they could not. Most commonly, older siblings were enlisted to help their younger brothers and sisters, but aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and family friends were also approached for math homework assistance. In addition, several parents mentioned using the internet as a resource to help them understand the math their children were doing and in turn enable them to assist their children with math homework.

Though very few parents used the games or activities suggested by the *Everyday Math* curriculum (in either the homework or the Family Letters), most parents engaged their children in conversation, games, and other daily activities that encouraged the development of their math abilities. These ranged from cooking together to telling time to counting change and using money to organizing family games of Monopoly. A few parents supplied their children with supplementary math materials, such as workbooks, which they monitored and corrected.

### **Parental Null Actions as Self-Reliance Strategies**

Not all parents engaged in the explicit actions described above, and sometimes there was variation in how the same parents responded in different circumstances. Rather than attributing this lack of explicit action to disinterest or disengagement with their children's math homework and math learning, we argue that many parents engaged in null actions purposefully, in order to build their children's self-reliance as math learners. These null actions represented a coherent enactment of these parents' philosophy of engendering self-sufficiency in their children and of what would best aid them as math learners.

Several parents articulated the view that homework was their child's responsibility—not theirs—and chose to not intervene in any aspect of their children's homework. They, like Ms. Demond, did not monitor or otherwise supervise what they considered to be a child's contract with the teacher and school.

I'm trying to teach my girls that, that's your responsibility, it's not mine. Not so much, you know, I've been to school, I've done school already. No, that's your—it's a responsibility, you have to get that done, and that reflects...on your grade. (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

One of our interviewers queried Ms. Demond about her role in her child's homework, and she was explicit in articulating the view that homework was her daughter's responsibility and that it was the province of the teacher—not

the parent—to monitor that it was done and that learning had happened. After recounting that she neither assists, nor observes, nor monitors her daughter's homework, Ms. Demond stated emphatically, "That's the teacher's job. That's the teacher's job."

Other parents were concerned that parental support for/intervention in homework could end up with the parent doing the homework for the child and hindering the child's math learning in the process. Ms. Decker recalled, "I had it easy, I was the baby so my sister did my homework for me. So, when I got older I had to relearn how to do it on my own." In response to being asked how this experience influenced how she helps her children with homework, Ms. Decker declared, "I'm not doing their homework!" Ms. Santos also insisted that the best way she could help her daughter was to *not* help her with her math homework:

I tell my daughter, you are going to leave that blank. The situation is not to hand in homework that is well done but that you don't understand. I don't want that. I understood, but you're going to leave that blank, and tomorrow, please ask your teacher to explain it to you again. (King, 5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Other parents, like Ms. Demond, acknowledged their own limitations in helping their children with math homework and shied away from the tendency of giving the child "the answer."

Some of that stuff I just—it's just, it's all news to me, and I don't want to, if I do know it, she's seeking the answer. And I don't want to give her the answer. I want her to know it—learn it on her own. (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Several parents felt that it was important to use homework as an opportunity to teach their children to ask questions of other adults when they don't know something.

So I did let her know, you know, like, no matter how old you are, you could have a problem, you have to ask. You know? Even mom sometimes, don't know something, I have to ask. (Ms. Demond, SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

While most parents did not take a fixed stance against helping their children with homework, many articulated the view that teaching their children to be self-reliant with homework was the foundation of their helping strategies. These parents came from a diverse spectrum of educational backgrounds themselves—from one with less than a high school degree to another who is an educator with a Masters degree—and cut across the different schools. These parents created a structure in which their children do homework and provided

the resources for its successful completion. Several parents explained their philosophies:

I don't think that homework is something that they should, you know, necessarily do on their own. Like, we should just assume because they were in school all day, they should just be able to complete their homework. But by the same token, you don't want them to be dependent on you, so the way I help them, is normally just to leave them the resources. I don't do it for them, I show them by leaving some resources, whether it's the conversion table in the back of the composition book, or if you have to pull up something off the internet, but I don't do it for them. (Ms. Keller, SCS, 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

These are parents who waited until their children came to them with a question before they offered assistance. Even then, the assistance may have taken the form of encouragement to seek an appropriate resource so that the children could solve the problem on their own rather than the parent immediately offering direct assistance.

When she has a little nervous breakdown? Then she comes and says, "What's mean, median, and mode?" and I say, "Why don't you look it up?" And she says, "I don't know where," and I say, "How about a dictionary?" And then, you know, if she's really unhinged, I help, and if she's not, I shoo her on to do that. (Ms. Jacobs, SCS, 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

A parent's confidence in the mathematics ability of her child also influenced decisions on when to help and when to step back. Ms. Nichols explained,

Well, my 3<sup>rd</sup> grader, he's excellent in math. He doesn't get his math genes from me. He's really, really good in math. So, he doesn't really even need help in math, you know. It's sometimes, a time or two, where he will have a little difficulty, and I would help him through it....But he's really good in math. (SCS, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Like Ms. Nichols, Ms. Knight describes stepping back in response to her child's desire to work independently: "But she, she kind of is getting to the point where she wants to be independent. So...she'll say, 'Well, I'll go and I'll do it, and I'll come back and show you...or if I need help, I'll come and get help'" (Whitman, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade).

Parental rationales for fostering self-reliance and encouraging independence seemed to be influenced by various factors, from a belief that their children should develop responsibility to confidence in their children's ability to do math. This goal coheres with school views on student accountability, especially as students advance to upper elementary grades; however, the parental

null action exercised in support of this goal may not always be acknowledged or viewed as concordant with the teacher's purpose and, thus, parents may be perceived as uninvolved.

### **Null Actions Associated with Impediments to Parent Agency**

An emphasis on self-reliance is one factor influencing parental decisions to engage in null actions. Other parents in this study described or alluded to impediments to their engagement with their children's math homework and math learning. Previous research has suggested that parents' lack of confidence in their own mathematical understanding can impede their ability to help; this often is further complicated by unfamiliarity with mathematics education reform goals and practices (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Remillard & Jackson, 2006). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) explained, "Parents appear to become involved in their children's homework also because they believe their activities will make a positive difference for the child" (p. 201). We posit that certain impediments constrain parent agency. Parents may desire to be involved but make an intentional decision not to be because they judge the existing, or perceived, barriers to be sufficiently robust.

In our study, we found two significant impediments to parental agency. First, for immigrant parents, limited English language ability and cultural expectations of schooling posed significant barriers. For many parents, limited math content knowledge and the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum itself presented obstacles to involvement in their children's math homework.

#### **Immigrant Experience as Impediment to Parental Agency**

When trying to exercise agency to support their children's math homework and math learning, the immigrant parents in our study faced an additional set of barriers, beyond those faced by U.S. born and/or English-speaking parents, that led directly to parental null actions. For the non-English-speaking Latino immigrant parents we interviewed, the most salient impediments to their agency were *language barriers* and *cultural beliefs and expectations around schooling*.

Despite their perceived low level of participation in their children's schooling, the immigrant parents in our study had high aspirations for their children's futures and recognized the importance of education. Most articulated a deep faith in the power of formal education to improve their children's lives. Ms. Rosales explained,

I finished college. I graduated and am a system's analyst, and the experience for me was wonderful. Arriving to this country, everything stops.

All those studies for nothing. So, I tell my daughter, “you have to study, you have to go to college, you have to progress more than mommy, just because mommy makes tacos in Taco Bell doesn’t mean that mommy doesn’t know”...I try my hardest so that my daughter can continue so that she will hopefully be better than her mother in terms of her education. (King, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Though the parents in this study desired to be a part of their children’s education, the language barrier and related fear brought about by their lack of English served as a significant impediment to these parents’ agency and often resulted in null actions. Ms. Santos explained her apparent non-involvement this way:

If they [the school] ask me why I don’t come to talk to them, it’s because I am afraid they will speak to me in English. I assure you that 50% of the mothers that at times they don’t even recognize or don’t call here, it’s the fear that they will speak to them in English. So, that’s really where we have to start. (King, 5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Ms. Rosales said,

I think that we need more people who speak Spanish...last year my child had a teacher who only spoke English. Therefore when I want to ask many things, I can’t. In that moment she doesn’t have someone to tell me, “Ok, your daughter is doing well”...I hear many moms who say that when they go to pick up their child’s report card they can’t ask anything...I ask, “Ok, she is fine? She talks too much?” Short phrases that I know the teacher understands. (King, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

These immigrant parents wished they could speak with their children’s teachers about education *in their native language* and were able to communicate with school staff when their children were in need of assistance. Their inability to do so led many to retreat from trying. Ms. Santos explained,

I know the principal is a very good person, but I always wonder and I am going to find out because I have this question, there must be a statistic of the number of Hispanic children in this school, and I think it must be more than 50%. And if at least half the children who come to school are Hispanic—I know this is an English-speaking country—but I think that if there are many Hispanic children and the parents don’t come, don’t see a way to relate to the school because they don’t speak the language, then the principal, as a person with a college education, who got to be the principal of a school, why doesn’t she see the possibility of learning the other language which in this case is Spanish?...When I’ve come to

speak to the principal, for a complaint or something, I've had to look for an interpreter, so a lot of us feel like we have our hands and feet tied because in the short amount of time that is available to us we cannot tell the principal how we really feel with our own words, and this bothers many of us. (King, 5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Ms. Estevez, a King 2nd grade parent, concurred, "...the principal speaks only English, so I don't go to him much."

Other parents understood that the impediment of language extended from their ability to communicate with their children's teachers and other school officials about their children's learning directly to their ability to assist with math homework. Ms. Rivera explained how difficult it was for her to understand her son's math homework:

I don't understand much. I more or less understand when I see the problem, but to read them I almost don't understand anything. They don't write them clear, they use language like in the doctor's office, like they say, "that is I-no-I-don't-know" [laughs], and you don't understand what that is...you don't know what that is, you don't understand what they are saying. You understand from the homework, if you know a little bit of math, but not from the expressions they use. (King, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Ms. Rosales' developed a strategy for helping her daughter with her math homework which involved getting her husband, who spoke more English, to help when he was home in between his two jobs or using her English-speaking nieces as a resource. Ms. Rosales explained,

I talk on the Internet with my nieces who are older, and they tell me. I write the question, and they answer by calling on the phone and explaining to my daughter in English. (King, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Ms. Garcia had also confronted a language barrier that prevented her daughter from completing her math homework, despite their best efforts.

She's in regular classes [not bilingual] so the instructions are in English. I can read a little so I get out my dictionary to translate, right, and sometimes it just doesn't work. I try and try to translate the instructions but then the problems don't work for us, and it's better to leave it like that [undone]. (Whitman, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Others parents emphasized the cultural breach between their preferred styles of communication—direct and personal—with their children's teachers and the kinds of communication systems in place in many urban schools, where most information, including information about the math curriculum and math homework, is communicated to parents via letters or fliers sent home



in the children's backpacks. This system, compounded by the language barrier, led several parents to feel a deep lack in communication with their children's school. As new immigrants to the United States, the norms and mechanisms of their children's schools, particularly in regards to expectations of parent involvement and school-home communication, were entirely different from what they had experienced in their countries of origin (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

When Ms. Rivera was queried about the types of communication she received from her son's school, she initially said she received, "Nothing. Only if the child misbehaves." When pressed, she acknowledged that "...the school does send some papers home during the week, but...I don't, I look at it, but I don't pay too much attention" (King, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade). To her, these papers did not constitute a true form of communication because she, like most of the Latino immigrant parents in our study, preferred communication with her child's school to be direct and personal.

Several parents were put off not only by the generic quality of the materials being sent home, but also by the fact that much of the written information was sent home in English. Ms. Estevez explained that the school mostly sent "papers" home to the parents and that often they were sent in English and she had to find someone—a friend or her son's teacher—to translate them for her (King, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade). Yet, when she needed to communicate something to the school, like most of the immigrant parents, she went there.

Valdés (1996) noted that, "Immigrant parents are unsure of their role in the U.S. public schools; they often misunderstood their role in their children's education because they didn't understand the concept of involvement as defined by the school" (p. 33). Not only were most of the immigrant parents interviewed unaware what math curriculum their children's schools were using and whether or not the school had homework policies, but some were unsure if their children's teachers even wanted them to be involved in their children's homework. When asked about this, Ms. Estevez, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade parent at King, laughed nervously and responded, "I don't know, I don't know."

Barring direct and personal communication, the non-English-speaking immigrant parents in our study were left unsure of how and when to intervene in their children's math learning and math homework, and they often resorted to null actions in the face of such impediments to their effective involvement.

### **Math Content and Curriculum as Impediments to Parental Agency**

For a variety of reasons, several parents explained how they found the curriculum itself, and the math content knowledge they believed it expected of parents, erected significant challenges to parents' inclinations to exercise their

agency to engage in their children's math learning through homework. It is important to note that neither we nor the parents we interviewed were suggesting that reform-oriented curricula should be abandoned in favor of other, more traditional curricula. The parent agency framework, however, affords a better understanding of how and why parents do not always engage in the explicit actions recommended through the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum materials and desired by school personnel.

Many parents described *Everyday Math* as the "new math," indicating that its content and methods were distinctly different from what they learned in school. Ms. Washington explained this disconnect between how she learned math and what her children were doing:

It's frustrating because I don't understand, and sometimes I'll try to call my sister and I'll ask her, and she's like, I got to see it. I don't even know what the heck you talking about, and I'm like, I don't even know what the heck I'm looking at. I mean, it be like that because sometimes you get something and be like, what the heck? Are you supposed to have this? Is this on your level? We're older. I guess they got new and improved things. They got things that we don't know, and some things that we do. (Whitman, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Practically, this concern was often manifested in the confusion parents encountered with *Everyday Math* conventions. For example, when asked about fact triangles, a means for students to practice math facts, parents were unclear about what the symbols on the triangles represented and why the facts were displayed on triangles in the first place. (More than one parent asked whether the dots on the cards were places to punch holes to make a necklace.) Mrs. Keller described,

I didn't understand it at first. I'm like—because, you know, we didn't use those symbols. Those are computer symbols, you know? When I did multiplication, division, the symbol was different. (SCS, 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Some parents, like Ms. Demond, questioned the efficacy of the spiral structure and sequence of the *Everyday Math* curriculum:

But I know, in her grades, we did have, like, more time, for everything, as far as addition, subtraction. We might have two weeks, or...I just know we spent more time than a week....Then they cram different things each day. Because each different day they might come home with something different. We had a set time to learn how to tell time, and... what's the other stuff?... We might have spent two weeks on that. Two weeks spending on something, that's different. Other than just a week. Because, you're not gonna learn how to do the rows and maybe money,

in just a week, and then move on down to something else. They're not gonna learn it. Can't learn like that. (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

For some parents, the unfamiliarity with *Everyday Mathematics* conventions reinforced feelings they had towards math (such as lack of confidence) based on their own experiences as learners. Ms. Demond explained,

I would love for them to go back to the basics. And I mean, if I probably—probably kind of knew it worked well, was explained, why it's that way, then I would understand. I wouldn't have such a negative feeling about it. If they, you know, kind of explained it to you, it wouldn't be such a bad—it might not be a bad thing. (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Ms. Ingram wondered whether her own confusion with math as a learner limited her understanding of the curriculum, saying, “You know, if you were good at math, you could figure this out. I was not one of those parents. So...I didn't get it” (SCS, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade). This gap between the parents' school math experiences and those of their children factored into parents' concerns about how they should act or help.

While *Everyday Math* does provide materials for parents through the *Home Links* component (including the Family Letter and Family Notes), how schools and teachers distributed these materials varied. What was notable in parent responses was that many parents suggested that they needed resources to support their children, and while sometimes the resources were not made available (e.g., workbook pages assigned but no Student Reference book sent home), even if they were, there was no assurance that they would be sufficient or helpful. For some parents, this stemmed from confusion over what the examples were demonstrating (i.e., what was the math, and how did it connect to math they knew?). Mrs. Washington described,

One time, the demonstration came home with the homework, and I thought it was homework, and I skipped over it. Then when I started doing the homework, I was like, hold up, oh okay, shoot, this is cool, they should do this more often. But when I was getting it without the homework, it's a different story. (Whitman, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Ms. Jacobs noted,

Yeah, that was one thing that I—I wasn't clear about. Whether she has a math notebook that she wasn't toting home with her, and that's why she doesn't—you know [remember or understand something]...I thought maybe there should be a glossary in the back of her little workbook there. (SCS, 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Mrs. Keller adamantly stated that she felt a textbook would aid her own understanding:

But one thing I did not like was that textbooks never came home. And what I didn't like about that was the fact that it didn't make me—I'm not in the classroom learning the lesson with Scott. So if he needed my help, I wasn't always able to give it, because I don't just off the top of my head, know cubic measurements, or...remember the geometric, you know, the names of the shapes or the area and perimeter formulas. I don't remember that. And so it was a little bit more difficult for me to help him, because they're not sending textbooks and things home.... Without the textbook, sometimes I felt inadequate so far as, am I giving him the right—? (SCS, 4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Parents' self-perceived lack of familiarity with or knowledge of the curriculum and the ways it represented math content served as an impediment to school-approved explicit actions and content support, such as encouraging children to try to solve problems in different ways and to communicate their reasoning. Ms. Rivera lamented the unfamiliar structure of certain problems:

I know when she sends homework that is like, "So and so has so much and so and so has so much" and it's like a summary, and you have to come to some conclusion from that and, ay! Those make me crazy. [laughs] And we are both like half an hour thinking about that, and we try to come to some conclusion and it's not right [laughs], and we make some horrible erasings in the notebook and in the end we say, "Let's let the teacher explain it to you!" after we've spent half an hour on that. (King, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Parents also expressed frustration at the ways in which the parent components of the *Everyday Math* curriculum intruded into the home space and time. Ms. Demond emphasized,

But the stuff that—as far as the things like, us doing—I understand it's more somewhat interacting for children, and I'm just like that's not math, that's not math....I don't need no one sending home a paper to tell me how to...interact with my children. I have my own special way of interacting and bonding, and I can take them to the store and show them how to do that....Some people—like, at the end of the day, like, my hours, the way I work, by the time I get home from work, it's not enough hours in the day to find time to do some of these things. You know? It's only, do what you really have to do.

That parents encountered challenges in understanding reform-oriented approaches in their children's mathematics schoolwork confirms findings in the field (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Remillard & Jackson, 2006). How these challenges affect parental engagement—that parents may opt to engage in null

actions when they perceive that other actions might not help them to support their children—complicates the efforts on the part of school personnel to use the “home” components of the curriculum as a means to improving communication and collaboration between home and school.

## Conclusion

Our data compel us to argue for a reconceptualization of parent engagement in children’s math homework that is broad enough to encompass alternate views of how and why parents activate their agency in support of their children’s math learning. What we are calling null actions are intentional strategies on the part of parents that are very much aligned with parents’ goals for their children’s education. Challenging a one-dimensional conception of parent involvement seems particularly important for parents in urban, underserved schools who are often characterized as disengaged and disinterested in their children’s schooling. Though current research on parent involvement might have moved from a “schools know best” deficit model of parent engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, 2008), the schools in which our study was conducted have not. Thus, our research calls upon educators to look beyond narrow conceptions of parent engagement with an exclusive focus on school-mandated actions so they don’t miss what parents are actually doing and why.

If parent involvement is increasingly seen as a policy move towards improving student achievement and part of math educators’ view of how children learn math, then *how* and *why* parents interact with their children’s math homework becomes critically important. Paying close attention to the differing ways in which parents act to support their children’s math learning will be fundamental to these children’s success. We would also suggest that the parental null actions for self-reliance described in this paper do not, in fact, run counter to schools’ goals for children’s math learning. Parents’ goals for student self-reliance actually align quite well with schools’ goals for student accountability and responsibility. However, the schools in our study failed to capitalize on this potential for alignment in any meaningful way. A reconceptualization of homework as a teacher–student contract, rather than a window through which to examine or a bridge through which to build home–school partnerships, might fit better with the perspectives of those parents who engaged in null actions for self-reliance. This recommendation further supports our observation that many of the students in our study actually do their homework in school, mostly in academically oriented after-school programs aimed at raising student achievement on standardized tests, *not* at home. In these cases, homework is not a “boundary object” between home and school, as our study

initially conceived it to be (Wenger, 1998). This finding cautions us to be realistic about what “home” work is and how parents can and do interact with it, despite their best intentions to support their children’s schooling.

The other null actions described in this article resulted in the context of impediments to parental engagement that can only be solved if addressed more directly and fully by schools. Schools with large immigrant parent populations must create a more welcoming environment for non-English-speaking parents, in part through the presence of bilingual personnel, but also through the more systematic and widespread use of Spanish language resources such as those the *Everyday Math* curriculum makes readily available to schools. Those impediments presented by the math curriculum itself involve recognizing that parents and children often do math quite differently. While reform curricula may offer some parents an opportunity to reengage with a topic they found alienating when they were younger and a chance for them to connect with and support their children’s learning as learners themselves (see Civil & Bernier, 2006; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Martin, 2006 who support this claim), for some parents that is not going to happen, and this must be considered acceptable as well. Options must be made available to parents *without judgment* if they choose, for whatever reasons, not to engage in a visible way. Parents should not feel that the curriculum prescribes particular interactions with their children, or their children’s homework, that do not cohere with their understandings of what it means to support their children’s learning. Overall, our research underscores the belief that greater latitude in conceptualizing and understanding parental involvement can potentially lead to more inclusive school practices and greater engagement on the part of parents which can, in turn, only serve to increase students’ school success.

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