

Partnering to Prepare Urban Teachers

A Call to Activism

Francine P. Peterman, EDITOR



Serving Learners

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CHAPTER SIX

Families AND Schools Apart: University Experience TO Assist Latino/a Parents' Activism

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In this chapter, we share the findings and dilemmas raised by our work helping Latino/a parents engage with their children's schools. For over a year, we worked closely with three Puerto Rican families and one Mexican family who asked us to help them negotiate with their children's schools (these included elementary, middle, and high schools in northern Delaware). All parents were concerned that their children were experiencing different sorts of troubles in school: educational, relational, behavioral, racial, attitudinal, and so on. All families were active participants in their children's education. All of them felt that they exhausted their own means and resources to find a solution to the problems their children were having at school.

PARENTAL ACTIVISM VERSUS PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

We will argue that the parents we observed and worked with were involved in parental activism and that that style of interaction with the schools was out of

step with school expectations for parental involvement. Following a sociocultural approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we reject the binary notion of parental involvement, with its two main possibilities being either parents who are involved in their children's school education or parents who are not. We think that this notion of parental involvement is hegemonic, essentialist, and manipulative, because it implies that there is one authority (usually the school) that defines what counts as involvement. In the discourse of parent involvement, parents seem to be placed in a double bind in regard to the schools. On the one hand, they can become involved on the school's terms in their child's education or else be viewed as a problem; on the other hand, they are expected to protect their children's interests but, by doing so (or not doing so), may be viewed by the school as overinvolved (or underinvolved) and recognized as a problem (Nakagawa, 2000). As Fine (1993) argues, parents "are usually not welcomed, by schools, to the critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices" (p. 682). By controlling the definition of *involvement*, the authority frames the ways in which the parents must participate in their children's education and manipulates the parents by inducing a sense of guilt when the parents fail to fit the tacitly imposed image of "involved parents" (cf. "management by guilt" in Hargreaves, 1994).

In our view, the discourse of parent involvement is in part responsible for a sad phenomenon of parent bashing that is common among teachers—teachers' negative predisposition to parents (negative prejudice). Parent bashing, or what we term *parentism* (H. Pleasants, personal communication, March 31, 2003), often takes two distinguishable forms: bashing against low-income parents for their "underinvolvement" in school and against middle-class parents for their "overinvolvement" (Nakagawa, 2000). In the first type, lower-income parents are described, as "neglectful", "uninvolved", and "disinterested" in their children's education and even well-being. Working for many years with preservice teachers, we have been faced with these forms of parentism on a regular basis. This is how one of our preservice teacher education students described low-income parents in general on the class electronic forum after spending just one day in her first teaching practicum:

The demographics in this classroom affect the learning in there because many of the children come from low-income areas and have large families. Their parents don't have time like they should to care about their children's schoolwork. Since they do not get much support at home, most of them do not do as well in school as they probably could.

Other students responded, "There are parents out there that just don't think it is important to get involved in their children's education." "It is the teachers' job to get the child involved ... and to inspire them to continue their learning at home no matter how uninvolved their parents are." Like low-income children,

low-income parents are often viewed as a deficit by schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Delgado-Gaitan writes, "Deficit perspectives depict inactive parents in the schools as incompetent and unable to help their children because they have a different language, work long hours away from home, belong to different ethnic groups, or are just not interested" (p. 22). Parent participation has the potential to exacerbate rather than alleviate educational inequity by further marginalizing families who define their roles with respect to family-school interactions differently than what schools demand (Crozier, 2000; De Carvalho, 2001).

The second type of parentism is set against primarily middle-class parents who are considered to be involved too much in their children's education by vocally and forcefully expressing their disapproval and disagreement with the teacher or school practices. This is how another student, a preservice teacher, put it:

I'm really nervous about many things that I might encounter [when becoming a teacher], but when I think about it, most of these worries stem from parents. I'm worried about parents. I know that I'm going to dread conferences because parents are going to tell me that I'm wrong about things and that I'm not doing a good enough job with some aspect(s) of teaching. I'm scared to death to hear those hurtful words because I know that I'm going to be trying my hardest, but that still won't be good enough for some people.

It is interesting that our preservice teachers have rarely mentioned school administrators as their concern, although it is the school administration that will closely monitor, supervise, and judge their teaching. Although rarely labeled as middle class, the preservice teachers seem to imply that those vocal parents have societal power.

In our observations, fear of and prejudice against parents have developed before preservice teachers go to their first teaching practicum, although, often, their parentism becomes stronger through interactions with in-service teachers who support the prejudice themselves and validate those prejudices with their own experiences with so-called bad parents. Our preservice teachers often portray teachers as experts on children, while viewing parents as ignorant people who must listen to the teachers. When we asked our preservice teachers to describe an ideal parent, many of them described a so-called teacher slave, a parent who does exactly what the teacher told him or her to do. Similarly, Minke and Anderson (2003), in reviewing parent-teacher conference literature for teachers, note that an emphasis is placed on teachers delivering information to parents (rather than listening to parents' concerns), all the while expecting conflict with the parent to emerge. Time for parents to express their concerns is thought to be best given at the end of the conference time. The overall impression that the literature gives, Minke and Anderson point out, is to regard the parent as an "enemy" whose input must be "managed."

In other words, ideal parent involvement demands parental acquiescence to school authority. In schools, we often experienced the expectation that parental contact with the school was simply to attend teacher-parent conferences. Furthermore, school personnel expected that the institutional purpose of the conference remained the same, whether the parent called and scheduled the conference or the parent wanted to change the format. One of the parents with whom we worked insisted that she had arranged to meet with her twin daughters' teachers because she was concerned about their grades. She called us and said, "I made an appointment with the principal." But, when we arrived to assist her, we were told that she had been called by the school and, according to the secretary, had chosen among a few options of times to meet. Even though the mother had called the principal for an appointment, she was given a time to meet with her daughters' teachers, and no one explained to her that the meeting was on their terms, not hers. In another situation when a student told her parents about her difficulties in school and the parents contacted us to make an appointment, we found that the same institutional expectations and patterns of interaction. In this particular case, the student had been to school for only three days, had her grades being transferred from another institution, and was experiencing harassment because of her nontraditional gender orientation. When we began the conference and before they knew who had called the meeting and why, the student's teachers took turns reciting their evaluation of her academic achievement.

In contrast to the traditional monological notion of parent involvement, we argue that all parents participate in their children's education—the issue is what form this participation takes and who is able to shape the conditions and practices of that participation (cf. "participatory notion of learning," as defined by Lave, 1992). All parents have to deal with their children's schools in one way or another. Paraphrasing Heidegger (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996), by the simple fact that their children are in school most of the day, parents are thrown into their children's schools whether they want to be there or not and are forced to relate and deal with their children's education and schools. The parents of schooled children cannot avoid positioning themselves in relation to the school. They have to participate in school. This participation can be positive or negative, depending on the type of participation, their and our perspectives on that participation, and their and our values. For example, Delgado-Gaitan (1991) found in her research that Latino parents were supportive of their children's education, though not in ways usually recognized by the school. As Latino parents noted, the range of their participation varies broadly: volunteering in school, helping with homework, advocating for the child's well-being and education, resisting oppressive school practices, providing the child with food and housing, crossing the national border

to give the child a better education, and even neglecting the child's educational needs. The parents' notion of participation in their children's education is democratic, dialogic, interpretive, and relational, inviting different parties to define it. In this chapter, we want to discuss Latino/a parental activism as a form of parent participation in schools, as well as our university-based role in that process.

We witnessed the parents of the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program as they planned meetings to help everyone involved in their children's education to see the problems the school was having with their kids and the schools' inadequacies in educating their kids. School personnel would almost uniformly reply that the problems were either intractable or imply that the parents were not adequately attending to their children's education. In our study, by their lack of attention to the needs of Latino/a students, schools reinforced monologic parental involvement. In cases where kids improved dramatically in schools, the most apparent cause of the improvement was what we call "the teacher-child divorce." The parents removed their children from a bad school or the teacher was changed. In one case, a student who had not done well in a conventional high school excelled at her studies while in juvenile detention. Children's problems at school often disrupted their lives in other spheres: at home, at the local community center, and with friends. We found that when parents provided strong support for their children and took their children's side in the conflicts with schools, they not only secured their relationship with the children but also contributed to the children's well-being and prevented them from experiencing dangers of alienation, such as running away from home, using drugs, distrusting parents, and other unsafe behaviors. While not all parents were able to ensure their children's academic success and their well-being, they believed they benefited from the experience of challenging the authority of the schools and insisting on better educational practices. In so doing, parents positioned themselves as political advocates for their own families and their communities. More than anything else, through their visits to the schools, they found they were not isolated; their problems were not theirs alone.

WHY DID WE SEEK COLLABORATION WITH LATINO/A PARENTS?

We were actively looking to work with Latino/a parents for several reasons. First, for the last nine years, we have involved our preservice teachers at the Latin American Community Center (LACC) of Wilmington, Delaware, as a part of teaching practicum that we organized for our cultural diversity course. Our students were engaged with Latino/a children (mainly Puerto Rican)

in an afterschool program called *La Red Mágica*, helping the children with their activities—games, computers, arts and crafts projects—and learning from the experiences (and the children) how to provide culturally sensitive guidance (Matusov & Hayes, 2002). The preservice teachers learned that although the children may be very successful at the LACC, they may fail in school and have problems there. A few years ago, together with the LACC officers and our students, we developed a short questionnaire for the teachers of the LACC children. We asked the teachers about the LACC children's strengths and ways that we can help the children at LACC with their education. By doing that, we hoped to build relations with the teachers. However, many of them commented that the children “do not have any strengths” and only listed long complaints about their students. Our university students and we knew the LACC children differently: We saw strength, potential, and community- and family-based educational resources. We thought that, by working together with the LACC children, their parents, LACC staff, and teachers, we could solve educational problems that the children face in their schools.

The second reason that we wanted to work with Latino/a parents was our concern with teachers' tendency toward parentism, as described previously. Our *La Red Mágica* model of teaching our preservice teachers how to provide culturally sensitive guidance through their engagement with Latino/a children in a safe and nonthreatening informal learning environment worked really well for them (Matusov & Hayes, 2002). We thought that we could expand the model by engaging the LACC parents with preservice teachers who would see the strengths, potentials, and resources in low-income parents and not deficits and uninvolvement. We wanted to give a human face to the “low-income parents” as we have done rather successfully with the “minority students” in our *La Red Mágica* project. To achieve this goal, we sought opportunities to develop relations with the LACC parents. Finally, we heard from the LACC staff that many parents were desperate in their struggle with their children's schools and would appreciate help from us, as university educators. Thus, we found that the interest was mutual. We were happy to help.

We started our work with parents through informal interactions with parents coming to pick up their children during the work of the *La Red Mágica* project. Those informal contacts led us to LACC parents' meetings of FAST, a nationwide and international organization involving “a collaborative team of parents, trained professionals and school personnel” in “a multifamily group intervention designed to build protective factors for children (4 to 12 years old) and empower parents to be the primary prevention agents for their own children,” focusing mainly on serving “teacher-identified, at-risk 5- to 12-year-old elementary school youth and their families; however, universal recruitment is now the recommended strategy” (Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 2006).

The LACC chapter of the FAST organization met once a month at the LACC. Initially, we had a peripheral role, attending the FAST meetings and talking informally with parents during the breaks after formally introducing ourselves at the beginning of the year. In the middle of May 2002, we were formally invited by FAST to discuss the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP), new high stakes standardized tests, and their consequences for the LACC children. At this point, we realized that collaboration with the LACC parents had begun. We started writing field notes on each encounter with the parents to learn and reflect on our experiences. We often checked our notes with parents, confirming our understandings of the events and parents' perceptions and ideas through phone calls or in discussions during meetings. Details of our collaborating with and supporting three families follow.

FAST MEETING: “IT IS THE LAW”

When FAST and LACC organized a meeting for parents and school district personnel to talk about their mutual concerns, parents came with many different concerns to which the two attending district representatives provided monotonous responses. One parent was deeply concerned that her child had not done well on the DSTP and was scheduled to be retained the next year. She wanted to know why the school didn't educate her child and why the child was not given more help and brought up to grade-level work. She wanted to find out if there was a way to keep her child in the age-appropriate grade level and access additional help. When this parent challenged the district's retention of her child, the school district representative only repeated, in Spanish, “It is the law; it is the law.” When parents expressed worries that their English was not good enough for them to help with their kids' homework, the district representative said that teachers were not solely responsible for their children's education and told the parents that they were the children's primary educators.

While this was a relatively short meeting, it was characteristic of every parental interaction with schools in which we participated. In our presentations to the FAST parents, we validated their concerns with research findings, encouraged them to share more concerns, and discussed possible solutions. We also described in detail the *La Red Mágica* project and our work with their children at the LACC. We told the parents that one of our goals was to see their children as students at the University of Delaware. We offered our help, and the parents were eager to take our contact information that we gave them. Out of about 20 families present at the meeting, seven contacted us by phone and/or by meeting at the LACC. Some contacts were facilitated and initially mediated by the LACC staff, many

of whom actively supported our collaboration with parents. From the beginning, our involvement with the parents centered around their children's problems with schools: discussing the problems with parents, validating their concerns, planning together the next steps, talking with their children, contacting schools on their behalf, and going to schools with them.

University Memorandum About Our Expected Work with LACC Children, Parents, and Teachers, the End of May, 2002

Developing productive family-school relationships with families of diverse backgrounds is acknowledged as particularly problematic (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Minke & Anderson, 2003). One of the most frequently encountered problems faced by many Latino/a children is that they do well in after-school, community-based programs but not as well in school. Many Latino/a families do not know how and what their children are doing at school. Most teachers do not know how and what their Latino/a students are doing at home or in the after-school programs. Thus, problems and misunderstanding arise among the families, the children, and the school. We wondered: Should we connect the home, school and community contexts and their different voices to help parents and teachers better understand every child's learning? Should we connect these everyday contexts for learning to build a community of practice in which every participant, including the children, will have the possibility to work together? Should we create spaces in which future teachers will have the opportunity to be conscious about multiculturalism? Some educators see the last two approaches as the most favorable, not only because they may help parents, educators, and the children better comprehend and be more consciously aware of children's situations and experiences to prevent their becoming oppressors and victims of bureaucracy and allow children to grow towards learning of freedom.

To build relationships among the schools, the families, the children, and the afterschool programs, we went to the LACC with the intent to know the families of the LACC children. The families were organized in one big group and held monthly meetings where parents and people who work at the center shared their concerns, ideas, and problems. In addition, every month, they invited a speaker who addressed topics such as how to rent an apartment for the first time, what to do if your teenager becomes pregnant and how to prevent the situation, what the standards exams are and what their consequences are, and what rights families have when they go to the school and talk to teachers. Families learned and resolved their concerns but also found that other families shared many of the same problems. Most importantly, the parents had the space to discuss and organize their points of view related to any issue of concern.

After some months of being there not only as observers but also as participants in these events, we realized we could provide parents with an orientation towards the problems they explained, which, overall, were related to how the teachers said that the children were not doing well at school.

We expected that building relationships between the school and the community would help motivate children, parents, and teachers to believe in themselves, and in their potential and, therefore, encourage them to learn. We decided to help parents and families go to their children's schools and talk to the teachers, thereby building relationships between the teachers and the children that would help them have a better time at school and become full participants in the classroom community, which would hopefully begin to embrace local communities. To accomplish these relationships we enacted the La Red Mágica's Principles of Working with Parents, Teachers, and Children which included:

1. Create "crossroads," a physical possibility for conferences among the teachers, parents, children, and the University of Delaware faculty and researchers (Austin, 1994).
2. Make sure that everyone can talk and see others as genuinely interested in what one says. Avoid fake or rhetorical questions and talking over or on behalf of the present parties (Cormier & Hackney, 1999; Hanhan, 1998; Sarason, 1995).
3. Help the child to be an active agent for his/her own learning (Austin, 1994; Matusov & Rogoff, 2002; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996; Sarason, 1995).
4. Avoid blaming the parties involved in the dialogue (Epstein, 1993).
5. Focus our narrative and discourse on the child's strengths, interests, and problems (as stated by the child) and on interpersonal problem solving (Minke & Anderson, 2003).
6. Make specific proposals (Fine, 1991; Robinson & Fine, 1994).
7. Set future meetings to implement and test consequences of the proposed actions (Robinson & Fine, 1994).

THREE CASES

As we worked to build relationships, we documented the following case studies.

"They Have Too Many Friends"

Middle school Latino children often sensed racism and bias in their interactions with schools. The first parent with whom we went to school—a mother of two twin girls in the seventh grade—said to us before the meeting with the principal

that she was not sure if her twins' troubles at schools were motivated by teachers' bias as her daughter insisted. We were told that we were meeting with the principal; but, like every other time visited a school, we were told that our appointment was with the principal, the principal was unavailable and we were directed to a classroom where three of the twins' teachers were sitting in a semicircle. The empty chairs in the classroom were stacked against a wall. The seated teachers asked us to bring the chairs for other teachers and ourselves. (They apologized for this command as soon as we gave our university business cards). Eugene introduced us to the three teachers and explained why we were there, that we were from the University of Delaware, that we worked with LACC parents, and that Maria would be the translator. We handed out our business cards and said that we would be glad to provide any help that we could and that they should not hesitate to contact us. We said that we were interested in finding positive ways to help the girls have a good education.

The first teacher omitted the subject in all his sentences. He stated, as if reading a prepared bulleted list: "has no strengths," "doesn't even try," and "doesn't do any good work." We didn't understand whether he was apologizing for not knowing how to deal with the girls or if this was an odd way of criticizing them. It turned out that he was assessing one of the twins. As soon as we caught a pause in the teacher's monologue, we told the teachers that we thought that we came to help to solve problems and that the children's participation in the conversation was crucial. The teachers were openly surprised by this idea, but they called for the twins. The girls came and joined the circle. We explained to them what the meeting was about, who we were (the twins recognized some of us from seeing us at LACC), and what we were trying to accomplish—to help them and their mother resolve some issues with the teachers.

As the twins explained that their mother had not yet arrived because she was involved in an auto accident the day before and her minivan was not out of the shop in time, several teachers rolled their eyes and opined that parents did not always care enough to come. The teachers stated that maybe their mother had just expected that the university representatives would be there and indicated that we should just start. Another teacher chimed in that he thought the twins were mentally disabled. We asked what led him to think this, and he said that they weren't good in class but that maybe they had too many friends and relatives in school to pay attention to classes. We asked what he meant by "too many friends and relatives," and he said, "*They're* always late because *they're* always running into some cousin or another on their way to class." By his intonation the teacher meant "they" were not just the twins but Latino children in general. We told the teacher that we also noticed in our work at LACC that Latino children have many relatives and friends, and, because of this, children help each other and

take care of each other. The twins nodded and validated that. We told the teachers how we encourage the kids at LACC to provide guidance and support to each other. We asked teachers if it would be possible to use the strong social milieu of Latino children in a positive way. However, the teachers did not respond to this question. Two other teachers came in and sat outside the circle and began to quietly converse between each other. Suddenly, one teacher asked the girls, "And, are you coming to the classroom? Are you aware that you are here to come to class and not to be in the hall all day with your friends?" The girls did not answer at all. There was a silent pause in which the teachers turned to us as if saying, "You can see it now yourself—further comments are unnecessary!"

Again, we took initiative and directed questions to the girls instead of supporting a conversation with the teachers in the presence of the girls. We asked the girls if they have any space at home to study and read books, if they sleep well and eat well. The girls answered "Yes". We then asked them who helped them with their homework if they had difficulties. The girls told us that tutors at LACC helped a lot, but, unfortunately, they could not come to the LACC every day because they live far away, and their mother could only bring them to the LACC twice a week. They said that their uncle sometimes helped, but he also lived far away. We asked if they could ask for help from the teachers the next day in school. The twins were surprised with this idea and firmly said "No," explaining that the teachers would yell at them. We asked the twins, "Why? Your teachers are here to help you, and they want to know why you could not do the homework." One twin said, "Because our teachers are mean and will not help us." We turned to the teachers expecting them to deny the twins' negative remark and to invite the girls to ask for help. The teachers denied that they would yell at the children, but one also validated the girls' expectations. A reading teacher responded that she had too many students in her class to give the girls her "individualized attention." The other teachers remained silent.

We followed the conversation with the children, asking them about their interests, strengths, things they like to do in their free time, and their aspirations for their future. The twins answered that they liked to clean the house and to go out and play on the street with their friends. As for the academic subjects, they said that they both liked English a lot but disliked reading, writing, and math because these subjects were "boring" to them. One of the twins said she liked science a lot, while the other said science was "so, so."

When asked about their aspirations, one of the twins said that, after finishing school, she wanted to be a teacher. We expressed our excitement about the possibility for us to be her university professors. We invited her to come to the university next fall and explained that if she came to visit, she might have a better idea of what she would do to become a teacher. The girl seemed to like the idea

of visiting the university. We also emphasized that her current teachers would be her future colleagues and that she could start learning from them how to become a good teacher.

The other twin said that she wanted to be a teacher in the past but that she had now become “too mean” for this profession. The teachers did not say anything in reply. We told the girl that, in our observation of her at the LACC, her perception of herself as being mean was wrong, because she willingly helped so many children there with computers and art drawings. The girl nodded in agreement with us. One teacher suddenly said, “Well, you know when you do bad things, don't you? And you are big enough now to know that what you do is not good, right?” (The teachers seemed to attack instead of to guide and to support the girls).

When the twins' mother arrived, she immediately apologized for being late because of her problems with her car. The teachers did not apologize for their inaccurate suspicions regarding the mother's absence. The mother began explaining how she organized her children's homework time and her expectations for her children's hard work and honesty. Sra. Allende¹ spoke in Spanish, and we translated what she said to English. Also, we translated what the teachers and we said to Spanish. Sra. Allende chided the teachers for not giving enough homework, saying that she asked the girls “What is your homework?” and then made them sit down at their desks until it was done. The teachers looked shocked. They had already expressed that Sra. Allende was a noncaring parent; yet, the mother came into the meeting with clear expectations and specific references to her attempts to help the children at home. One teacher then introduced all the other teachers present in the room, even the two in back who briefly stopped talking to each other to introduce themselves. When one teacher explained that one of the twins was not giving her mother an accurate story about homework, Sra. Allende apologized, clearly angry at the twins, and said that if she had known that her daughters really had homework, it would have been done. She made it clear to all present that this was unacceptable and that her standards for her daughters were higher than that. The teachers probably expected “yet another” situation where a parent did not care, but may have realized that these were supervised kids in an interested family.

Sra. Allende articulated to the teachers that she was ready to help her daughters but that it would be better if they would have some texts that were also in Spanish, so that she could help the girls, because she didn't read English. The language arts teacher suggested that she get a Spanish-English dictionary, halted as if she thought that didn't sound quite right, and revised her idea to say that the twins could use it to practice. The language arts teacher, Jennifer, then explained how she had tried to help the girls by providing work sheets in Spanish, but, with

so many children in her class, it was hard for her to give individualized attention to the twins. It seemed to us that the teacher was fairly nice and certainly eager to try to use her Spanish, but we were surprised at the suggestion of a dictionary, since it is not really the easiest thing to use when you have to deal with tenses and try to figure out a sentence word by word. Another chimed in with stories of the girls doing very well in classes that had small projects. Two other teachers remained outside the circle, still talking to each other, and Maria said, “Excuse me, do you want to say anything that I can translate for Sra. Allende?” They didn't and kept talking.

The language arts teacher was also willing to do more individualized work. The other teachers did not add anything to the discussion. We asked the teachers what would help the girls to improve. One teacher said that they need to get more help if they do not understand things.

Also, Sra. Allende insisted that the twins should be given homework to do if the twins are suspended from school again for wrongdoing. The teachers promised to do that and showed us and the mother where they would leave the homework assignments in the future. But, to our knowledge, they never made any attempts to do this.

Sra. Allende also wanted to let the teachers know that she did not agree with the idea of suspensions as punishments to get the kids to understand the rules of the school. She explained to the teachers that she wanted her daughters to be respectful girls with a bright future. She wanted her daughters to go to the university, and she wanted them to learn how to speak English in order to be able and ready to be independent women. She also offered alternatives to the suspensions: She suggested that, instead of putting the kids on the street for two or three days, they could better explain to the kids what the rules of the school are and put them in a room with texts, books, or some task to do. She argued that, if the teachers do not do this, then every time her daughters or other kids miss school, they are missing lessons and possibilities to learn.

In response, the English teacher showed a book with the rules of the school to the mother and, looking toward the kids, said,

They perfectly know the rules because we read to them from this book at the beginning of the year. They know exactly which things are forbidden and the reason why we suspend them is always because they are fighting with other kids and they know that this is forbidden.

The teacher continued saying that she and some other teachers in the room did not agree with some of the rules, especially with the rules that require leaving the children without instruction during the suspension and with the rules giving suspensions for minor infractions. But this teacher felt pretty powerless about the

suspensions. “In any case,” the teacher said, “you should talk with the principal because all we do as teachers is write a referral, and it is the principal, who decides to suspend them.” She also said that she disagreed with suspensions as well, but it was not her policy. The teachers agreed to give homework to the girls during future suspensions (but they never did). We asked where the mother could pick up the homework, and the teachers replied that they would leave it in the main office. We also gave our phone numbers to the teachers, so that they could call us in case they need to send Sra. Allende a message—we could then translate their message to Sra. Allende (they never called us).

The mother said again that she thought that suspending the kids is not a solution and told the teachers that her daughters often lied and did not share with her why they were suspended from school and why they were fighting. She turned to the girls and told them to ignore the kids who want to fight and, if it is so difficult to do so, to ask the teacher for help with the situation. At this point, we asked the kids, “Why do you fight?” The girls replied, “We fight for two reasons. One is because some kids are calling our names and insulting us; the other is because if we are not fighting the offender, another kid older than us will fight against us.” The teachers said nothing, and the mother told them that they will have to ignore the other kids or to talk to the principal and teachers.

At this point, we explained to the teachers that, when we started to work at the LACC five years before, the LACC also had a problem with many kids fighting with each other. The adults at the LACC started to think about how they might help the children. They decided to all sit down together, kids and adults, and asked the kids to create the rules that would help them avoid fighting. After that, the number of fights started coming down, and now there are not very many fights at the LACC. The mother listened intently to us while the teachers remained silent.

The science teacher and the reading teacher told the mother, nearly at the same time, that another reason why the girls were suspended was that they were skipping a lot of classes. At this point, one of the twins asked us not to translate this point to her mother, because the mother knew already, or maybe she could say this to her mother by herself later. We told the girl that we were there because her mother wanted to help them, and because she also trusted us translating everything correctly and that was why we must do that. It was apparent that the girl did not agree with us. She laughed a bit in apparent embarrassment. Upon hearing the news about her girls’ skipping science classes, Sra. Allende was openly angry that the girls were lying to her. She yelled at the girls. Sra. Allende apparently wanted to make her anger known to the teachers while projecting that she deeply cared about her daughters’ education and wanted to work together with the teachers in disciplining her daughters.

We said that we were surprised that the girls were skipping subject classes that they liked. One of the twins replied that she enjoyed the science experiment “with the light,” mentioning a particular experiment. Then the second science teacher said somewhat apologetically, “We don’t have enough money to do a lot of experiments because we don’t have a lot of funds for equipment.” We asked the science teacher what kind of science equipment kit would be good to buy for the kids to use in the LACC after school, but the science teacher did not know because the school does not have many science kits. Two teachers, both the woman who did work sheets in Spanish and the science teacher, agreed that the girls did better in settings involving activity and variety. The science teacher said he would try to have whichever twin he had do more of that, but that there were also other parts to his class on which they would have to work. The science teacher also explained that, while the girls may enjoy experiments, a lot of his class requires reading comprehension and math skills, and, even if they’re interested in the experiment part, they don’t do well enough on the main part of the class. (Both of these were teachers at whom the girls looked when they said they could not ask for help because their teachers were mean.)

At this point, we introduced the idea of enrolling the girls into the LACC summer camp. The mother liked the idea, although she had a problem with tuition and transportation, and so did the girls. We explained the different opportunities and facilities available for the kids if they attend the LACC summer camp (e.g., poetry club, math tutoring, computer lab, Internet chat, and opportunities to draw and to learn dance, among others). A twin said that she made a dolphin picture when a guest art instructor from Colombia was present the previous summer at the LACC. We congratulated her because we saw this picture and explained that children at the LACC wanted to make postcards out of pictures and sell them.

We walked out with Sra. Allende, asking the girls how they felt and telling them that we thought they were quite brave to be in a room full of adults talking about them. They said, “It was okay” and they weren’t really scared because they recognized Eugene from the LACC. Sra. Allende thought that the teachers were less racially biased than she expected based on the daughters’ reports, but she was very disappointed that the girls had been lying to her about homework. Sra. Allende asked us if we agreed with her daughters that the teachers were racists, and we brought up the example of the teacher’s open prejudice about Latino children having too many relatives and friends, a sentiment apparently shared by the other teachers. She did not witness that, as she came to the meeting later). Sra. Allende expressed concern that the girls were not getting enough of the kind of instruction with which they seemed to do well. She had expected overt racism but found instead that teachers were mostly “nice,” even while they were saying very disrespectful things. She said that she had begun to doubt that the schools were

racially biased, because everyone was smiling and being encouraging, but she also realized that their form of disrespect was harder to pin down, because it was so seemingly polite.

Months later, the girls continued to do poorly in school, often not attending classes and school all together. When Sra. Allende noticed that they came home without homework, she contacted the school. She was informed that the girls were often not in class and that they may be getting off the bus before getting to school. She began driving the girls to school, but they still failed in all their subjects. She said, "I am very worr[ie]d because although there is one teacher who knows how to talk our language, normally I do not have anybody who is helping me to understand what is wrong with my daughters." While she continued to have problems with her girls and the school, she thought that going to school to talk to teachers was important, because it helps the teachers realize "that schools need translators to help families like us to understand the problems that our kids have, and also that it is very important to know and to be in contact with teachers and principals from the beginning." She also wished that we could all go to school together again to "make teachers and parents understand each other."

In a later conversation with Sra. Allende, it became apparent to us that Sra. Allende was siding more and more with the school as her daughters' conflicts grew there. She saw that

the [main] problem here is the attitude of my daughters. Normally they are not listening to me at all or to the teachers. So, what I have been thinking is to make them scared, to make them understand the importance of studying and to become somebody. If not, they will finish at the court and in the prison.

She was apparently scared about her daughters' future, but she saw the solution as changing her daughters' attitudes and making them more compliant to the teachers' demands. However, from our interaction with the teachers described previously and their lack of any follow-up actions based on suggestions that emerged in our meeting, we found the teachers' demands unrealistic, unsupportive, and unprofessional. The parent thought that the solution was her daughters' listening to the teachers and to her, ignoring what she learned *by listening to the children* about the teachers' racism and what was going on in school. As Sra. Allende told us, she could not move the children to another school or enroll them into the LACC that year because of financial, transportation, and institutional policies. The only viable solution she saw was to become a conduit for the school's impossible demands—to become a school policewoman for her daughters. She reported one of the girls to the police when she did not come home to sleep at night. By "scaring" the children and being tough with them, while also advocating for them at school, she created a "schizophrenic

double bind" (Bateson, 1987) that often tears a child apart psychologically (leading to a situation where no one wins). When we tried to discuss alternative approaches, Sra. Allende became frustrated with us.

We worried about the twins and their mother, Sra. Allende. Another LACC Puerto Rican high school girl who recently surrendered herself to police, asked the court to interrupt her probation because her life in school and at home became unbearable. Juvenile detention was the only place where she experienced unambivalent success and even support from adults. The case is very complex, but like Sra. Allende, the girl's parents' double-bind approach of being child advocates and school policemen (school conduit) prevented their listening to their children.

Divorcing School

Another LACC parent named Cindy, who was also faced with her children being retained, was interested in knowing what her rights were. She knew that there was some provision for parental refusal of retention but had been unable to stop her son's retention from fifth grade. Her daughter, Felicia, had been retained the previous year, and the mother, despite her weekly attempts to get a response from her teacher, had been unable to have the teacher tell her the kind of extra work Felicia needed to do. Cindy arranged for the LACC education director to give Felicia extra tutorials at the LACC, but, without any teacher response to a single request, Felicia continued to do poorly. When Cindy received a letter from the school about her son, Fernando, she decided it was time to go further up and talk to the principal. A form letter arrived a few weeks before the end of the school year. It indicated that a district-level decision had been made to retain her "son/daughter," since he had "failed one or more of the following courses" (followed by a list of all possible academic subjects that one could fail and thus be retained). The letter also mentioned that Cindy could dispute a decision to retain her "son/daughter," and she called the phone number on the letter. The person who answered at the district office said that she was not the person to call for disputes and told her to contact the school principal (who had signed the letter).

Cindy made an appointment, and we all drove down to a brand new school at the edge of the district's boundaries, several miles from the family's home. We walked into the office and said that we had an appointment with the principal. The secretary said that the principal was out sick that day and that she would contact the assistant principal. We waited about 10 minutes until he arrived and introduced himself to Cindy, and we went into a conference room. He told us all that he was the assistant principal and started to ask Cindy why she was there. She said, "Aren't you going to ask who these other people are?" and then she introduced us, as we handed out our business cards. He said, "Oh, you're from

University of Delaware? I got a degree in engineering from Delaware. I was nominated to go to West Point, but I wound up going into engineering instead.” Cindy showed him the letter she had gotten from the district, and he said that he would get Fernando’s file and his teacher. His teacher came in very briefly, but Cindy wanted to talk with the assistant principal, not the teacher, since it was already too late to do something, and the teacher had misled her in past. Cindy had her son’s report card, and his grades for math were passing (one was even a B) until the last quarter, when he failed. Cindy said that the teacher had said that since Fernando had done so badly the last quarter, he doubted that the other quarters reflected his ability accurately, and he decided to fail him. The vice principal seemed to find this an adequate explanation, but we did not.

Cindy also showed the vice principal Felicia’s homework notebook in which she had requested additional help and homework every week yet the teacher ignored her requests. Cindy told the vice principal that she called the teacher every week to ask if Felicia could do more and what could her tutor do to help her. Every week, the teacher said, “She’s doing fine, but her grades continue to be marginal.” She kept a written record of these attempts, which she showed the principal. The assistant principal asked Cindy why she didn’t call him instead, since the teacher wasn’t responding. She said she didn’t know she was supposed to call him, and since she had tried to call the central office person about Fernando’s retention and been told she had to start further down the hierarchy, why should she be expected to jump over the teacher? He said that if she had called him earlier, they wouldn’t be having this problem. She said that if he’d supervised his teachers better, we wouldn’t be having this problem. She asked, “Don’t you watch what these teachers do?” He said Felicia’s teacher was new. She said, “Then you should be more careful with her and make sure she knows how to teach. What kind of teacher doesn’t give any homework at all?” Cindy said that Felicia had been retained last year, and she knew that Felicia was supposed to have an individualized educational plan (IEP) to help her do better this year but that one hadn’t been prepared. The assistant principal said that wasn’t his fault, because this school wasn’t even open then, so it must have happened at another school. Cindy pointed out that he wasn’t responsible for Felicia’s retention but that his school should have provided an IEP *this year* and had not. The assistant principal replied that developing an IEP for Felicia would be unfair for other kids who do not have IEPs. Cindy also said that she was not going to let them retain Fernando, since they didn’t know how to educate Felicia and weren’t helping this year. The assistant principal said, “but we won’t retain Felicia because we can’t retain a student twice.” Cindy said, “I know, but you are still not educating her. I ask for homework, and I don’t get homework. What good does it do to retain her and then do nothing?”

We talked with Cindy after the meeting, and all largely agreed with her idea to get her kids out of this elementary school. A few months later, after having

seen Cindy, Fernando, and Felicia a few times a week at the LACC, we found them very eager to talk about their new school, and they brought in report cards, exams, and papers to show. Fernando got straight As, and Felicia had an A and a mixture of Bs and Cs and was very proud of an exam on which she got a 92 and an essay on which she earned an A. By then, our preservice teachers at the LACC had begun to get to know these kids and talked about them as examples of two students who were very enthusiastic about their school. Cindy was empowered by her ability to effect change in her children’s educational outcomes and was eager to help other parents work their way through difficulties with schools. She started by being well organized and strongly committed, and she managed, through the frustrating negotiations with the school hierarchy, to remain confident that there was a better solution. Cindy wasn’t able to change that school’s practices. Making sure that all students in the school are provided with adequate education remained the responsibility of the vice principal.

Cindy’s strong voice of advocacy was amazing. Our numerous informal conversations with Cindy at the LACC, where she worked, indicated that she stayed in close touch with her children, listening to them. She did not accept unrealistic, unsupportive, and unprofessional demands from the teachers and did not hesitate to express her opinions. She constantly monitored the children’s homework to figure out if they can do it and if the homework makes sense. If not, she contacted the school. Although Cindy insisted that, without us, she would not have made the decision of transferring the children to another school, we think that our contribution was minimal—we only provided moral support and validation of her decision and her advocacy. Due to her success and position at the LACC, Cindy became influential for other LACC parents in providing advice to other parents in need. Also, it is important to mention that to make a school transfer across two school districts required Cindy to have access to an informal network of friends and relatives to make the change possible.

Mario and the Eggs (and the Pencil and the Notebook...)

On October 1, 2002, Sr. Hector and Sra. Amelia Guillet had just finished moving. Hector told us he was up until 2:30 a.m. still moving things to their new house and then had to go to work early, so he only got about three hours of sleep. Very concerned about Mario, their 12-year-old son, Hector took some time off work in the middle of the day and gave up his lunch hour, so that he could go with Amelia and us to the middle school. We also brought their two-year-old Lesley who was very good the whole time, coloring and having fun. We asked if Hector liked their new place, and he said that they had to move, it was a better apartment, but it was a worse neighborhood, because there were drugs all over. In Spanish—she spoke Spanish the whole time, except at the end, and, near the end,

she started to answer questions I asked Hector in English, Sra. Amelia explained that Mario had been suspended because he didn't have a pencil in one class and he talked to friends in another class. None of us understood how that could be true.

On the drive to school, Sr. Hector said that he thought Mario must be sitting in the principal's office because the letter from the principal said that Mario would not be allowed back into classes after his suspension until the parents had a conference with the teacher. The principal was expected to be present at the meeting. When we got close to the school, we were looked around, because the buildings were very grand and impressive, and we weren't sure we were really at the right place. Sr. Hector and Sra. Amelia said they hadn't been to the school before, and Hector said, "I don't think this is right [that is, the right place]. It looks like a castle." It did turn out to be the school (which, by the way, had almost no parking, as if the school didn't expect visitors).

We went in the office, and the secretary was very nice, suggested we have a seat, while she found the principal, Mrs. Homer, and he came to meet us. (It turns out that Mrs. Homer is not the principal, but no one ever explained that the principal would not meet us or who Mrs. Homer was, so we just assumed she was the principal). We also asked that she get Mario and a translator. The translator never arrived, but his social studies teacher spoke Spanish. Mario brought his lunch to the office.

His social studies teacher, Britney came to the office, because she wanted to talk in detail to the Guillets before they met the principal. She was surprised that Mario was in class, because she knew that the Guillets were here because he was suspended. She explained that Mario had been suspended because the policy is that if a student is sent to the time-out room twice in one day, he gets a one-day suspension. She assured us that the teachers were just following policy. Sra. Amelia asked if it was for lacking a pencil and talking in class, and Britney said that she didn't think those were all the reasons for the suspension. She explained that teachers were concerned that Mario wasn't attending class, didn't hand in his homework, and was disorganized. Officially, Mario was suspended for not having a pencil in one class and not having his notebook in another.

We then walked down to what we thought was the principal's office (and continued to think was the principal's office, until we found out on the third visit that Mrs. Homer wasn't the principal), where we met Mario's reading teacher, Mrs. Sicilia. Before anyone had a chance to say anything, she started talking very quickly, saying that Mario was disruptive and he "owed" her seven homework assignments and two tests. She said that he was very disorganized. Maria said, "Let's try to do this a little differently" and asked Mario what he liked best about school and if there was something about his favorite subjects that he thought was most fun. He said that he liked gym and social studies. He liked gym because he got to play, and he liked social studies because they were always doing projects.

We explained that he was very good at the LACC, that he helped other students, and that he was very respectful and organized there. We asked him if there was anything about school that made it less fun, and he said it could be boring sometimes. The reading teacher didn't seem to like this and said she was going to get his transcripts to show that the suspension didn't just come out of nowhere. When she went out, Britney, the social studies teacher, explained to the Guillets that her class does lots of little projects and that Mario gets to move around the room and work with others. She said that not all teachers teach like that, so we would need to help Mario to also do well in other kinds of classes, too.

Sra. Amelia said that Mario did do his homework at the LACC, and she signed off on it. Britney said that maybe he didn't hand in his homework and needed to work on organizational skills. She also said that, in her class, when he needed to get out a sheet of paper, he lay down on the ground and spread out his things while he tried to find paper in his notebook. She said that, because kids are always moving in her class, it doesn't bother them, but other teachers find it a problem and may consider this disruptive.

The reading teacher came back in with Mario's transcripts and said that he was failing every class and had failed every class last year. The teachers then started to try to figure out if he had been retained the year before. Sr. Hector explained that, about two years ago, his family had gone back to Mexico for four months, and Mario's schooling got interrupted. It sounded to us like they weren't all sure that he was in the right grade, but they were particularly concerned because he was in the fifth grade when the consequential, state-administrated DSTP is given. Britney explained that Mario was getting an extra class in math to help prepare for the test. The reading teacher started to complain about Mario, and the social studies teacher said, "I think we should do what [was suggested] and be more positive about Mario."

We asked Mario if he liked to read, and he said that he liked to read about wrestlers but that reading class was boring. He said this was so because they read boring books. He said that he likes to read to his brother, but the books are for little kids, so sometimes he gets bored with that. We asked if he would read with our university students and pick books that he liked, and he said he would. The reading teacher had to leave at that point.

Mario's social studies teacher suggested that she would help him reorganize his notebooks and that he find someone to take him to the bus stop. He said there was an older kid in his neighborhood, maybe an eighth grader who could help. One of his parents reminded him that they had just moved, so he would need to find someone else to help him get to the bus on time.

That reminded Sra. Amelia that they needed to get information about buses (that was part of what we were going to do at the school anyway), and the social

studies teacher and the principal's secretary identified which bus Mario rode and provided a form he needed to give to the bus driver. However, Mario was assigned a detention that day, had to stay late, and had to ride another bus, so the teacher explained. (We never learned why Mario was given a detention, because no one could find the form that explained the reason.)

The social studies teacher asked Mario if there were other problems, and he said that there were some kids who were giving him problems. She said you should go to a teacher to help you with that, so that you don't get in trouble. He said that the teacher doesn't care. She said that not all teachers are the same; you may have to go to a few teachers before you find one that will help you. She said that she would take her lunch hour to help Mario straighten out his notebook and meet him before he went home on the bus to make sure that he was staying organized. She went out to get the principal.

While she was gone, we asked Mario if he was nervous. He said no, but he did look deflated (he is usually so active at the LACC!). We asked him if reorganizing things would help or if there was something fun we could do at the LACC with our preservice teachers. He said he thought maybe reading with them would be good.

The social studies teacher came back and said that the principal would be right there. The social studies teacher said that there were parent-teacher conferences in two weeks when they would see if things had improved and talk with other teachers. She asked if the Guillets could come at 2:30 or 4:30 p.m., but Hector explained three times that he worked until 5:00 p.m. The teacher replied, "Then can you come at 3:00 p.m.," and they went back and forth. Hector said over and over again "No, I work until 5:00," until the teacher said, "Okay, come at 5:00." Hector said that he would leave work at 5:00 and so would be there a little after that. She asked if he could come earlier, and he gave up and said he'd work through his lunch hour, so that he could leave to be there at 5:00. Britney then gave Sra. Amelia her home phone number and said that, if she couldn't reach her at school, please call her at home, that her husband speaks Spanish, and that she could call anytime, because they stay up late. She repeated this several times, expressing concern that the Guillets to feel comfortable calling her.

The principal then came in and asked if we'd covered everything because she didn't want to repeat the policy. She seemed nice but spoke in a very loud voice. She said she wanted her school to be a place where all kids were welcomed and did their best. She called in the teacher who supervised the kids in time out and suspension, and he came in. He was young Latino man, maybe in his late 20s. He said, "Mario's problem is he's lazy. And, disruptive." The principal told Mario that she wanted him to do well and feel like this was his school and that we all wanted him to do his best.

We all thanked everyone and started to leave, and the social studies teacher came out to walk with us. There was much hand shaking and exchanging of cards and phone numbers. Mario waved good-bye and went back to class. The Guillets didn't look satisfied, but the social studies teacher said, "Call me in a week. We'll see how Mario is doing, and then we'll all meet at the parent teacher conference." She repeated that they should feel that they could call her at home. She added that we would all keep close watch on Mario. We asked Hector on the way home if he felt that he understood why Mario had been suspended, because we were still confused. He didn't understand but hoped things would get better, but he wasn't confident that they would. Amelia remained frustrated that little things that Mario did could be taken so seriously and that the school would demand that the parents come to school just to find out that Mario hadn't brought a pencil to school, a fact they already knew. (The social studies teacher later told us, in a phone call, that her solution to such things was to have extra pencils.)

Within a month, we got another call from Sr. Hector. Mario was suspended again, this time because he brought eggs to school. Because we had Britney's phone number, we called her and asked for a fuller explanation. She said that Mario had written in his notebook that he needed eggs for science class, so that his mother would get him eggs. That was not true. Mario brought the eggs to school to throw them at the school buses. He did not do this but was nonetheless suspended. Now, at half a dozen suspensions, Hector once again gave up lunch hour to visit school, but Amelia was too frustrated to come again. We picked Hector up at his new apartment, further up the hill. He said that this was a worse area for drugs than the old place. This time Hector was very irritated at the school, saying "If you find eggs, why don't you just call me, and I'll take care of it? Why do you have to suspend him for three days and have him get more behind?" His main source of frustration was that Mario had intended to throw the eggs but in fact had not done anything. Hector reasoned that the school could save a lot of time and effort if they would just contact him instead of taking him away from work every few weeks, so Mario could go back to school. He was also even more frustrated at how minimal the infraction was, but one of Mario's teachers said repeatedly, "Los huevos son muy peligroso" (in Spanish, "The eggs are very dangerous"²). We all paused, likely in respect for the fact that none of us will ever hear that particular phrase again. In the school meeting, Mrs. Homer opined that Mario could have done a lot of damage if he had hit a bus with an egg and distracted the driver. She also said that, if he continued to get suspended, Mario may be put in an alternative setting. In the car on the way home, Hector said, "First they suspend him for not having a pencil, and then they suspend him for eggs; education is more important." We asked him if he would mind if Mario was put in a different setting, and he said that as long as he gets an

education, it would be all right, but he didn't want Mario put somewhere where he wouldn't learn as much as other kids.

Within two weeks, Hector called again because Mario was suspended. We had another parent-teacher meeting that day, so we could not join him at the school as he requested. We saw Mario at the LACC and asked what had happened at school. He said that a kid was picking on one of his friends, and he stepped in. The teacher only saw him doing anything wrong, and he was the one who got in trouble. He said that he thought he had done the right thing by trying to stop someone from bullying his friend, and he did not think it was right that he was the one in trouble. Mario seemed, each succeeding time we saw him, to be less and less interactive. We saw them once more at the LACC, and Hector was not hopeful about how things were going.

However, Mario began doing better at school and extremely well at the LACC. We ran into Mario several times in February and March of the following year, and Mario told us that he liked the school and liked not being suspended this year. Mario's father also told us that Mario was doing much better in school. Scott, the computer coordinator at the LACC, told us that Mario got much more relaxed at the LACC and was extremely cooperative and helpful.

At the same time, Amelia, Mario's mother, credited a new teacher for the change:

I wanted to tell you about Mario. The most important thing for my husband and for me is that Mario now is happy, and he is doing very, very well at school and at the LACC. At the school, he is passing all the exams and subject[s], since he has a new teacher. He is right now in sixth grade, and he is very happy talking only when he has problems to understand the teacher and not talking all the time as he use[d] to do before. And Mr. Scott, at the LACC, often gives him the responsibility to be the only one who is taking care of the group in the computer room, and Mario feels great with that, because Mr. Scott believes in him, as you, Cris, and Eugene, Sra. Maria. My husband and me are feeling and noticing month after month how much Mario is learning and how much he likes to go at the school and the LACC.

However, the apparent victory for Mario's education had taken its toll on the family. Because the parents had to go to school, their employment as well as the family's financial well-being suffered. As Amelia described,

The reason why we started to have so many problems with our jobs was because every time that we use[d] to go to the school because our Mario was excluded or suspended from the school, we had to ask for a permission to leave the job and talk with his teachers. Unfortunately, and Cris knows a lot about that, we had a time in which our Mario used to be suspended nearly once or twice a week and for terribly simple reasons like to forget a pencil one day or to misunderstand a schedule one afternoon.

Amelia's analysis of the situation points to the importance of schools understanding that their strength comes from the strong involvement of their communities:

Mario is doing very, very well, and my husband and I are not feeling lonely, because we can feel how the people at the LACC and also you, Cris, and Eugene are always there for our son and for us. The problem is that, in this country, the schools did not understand how important the Latinos and the Latinas are, and it is unthinkable to me and to my husband not to have help from the school in terms of [a] translator. For example, at Mario's school, the science teacher, who is Latina, from time to time, helps me at the meetings, but it very often happens that, when I am having the meeting with the teachers, she is teaching. Well, the good news is that there are people like you, Cris, and Eugene who are taking seriously the voices, the work, and the needs of us Latinos, and I am very sure that very soon this country will realize that, without Latinos and other cultures who are living here, this country is nothing.

She also explained that

... it is very important to be in contact with other families. Time to time, Sr. Nicholson holds [FAST] meetings. Normally, my husband and I always attend, because it is very important for us to be together with other Latino families and to listen to problems others have with other schools. ... It was very important to us, and we believe that it is very important to make the school understand that Latinos and Latinas are not alone, and it is easier, at least I understand it is, to make my voice visible when we have support. My dream is that teachers will understand our cultures and at least, if not all of them, at least some of them will also speak our language. ... Because I still cannot understand how it is possible to suspend a kid because he forgot a pencil. ... But now it is not like that, now Mario is happy, and he is doing very, very well at the school and at the LACC. We need [people] to make our voices more visible and to make pressure to the schools to let them understand that our kids are as important as the kids from other cultures, like American.

FACING OBSTACLES WITH OTHERS

While not all of our experiences with schools were immediately successful, there were some positive results. First, and most importantly, parents realized that they had significant and powerful issues to raise with schools. That the schools did not always respond with respect, and their contacts were typically "crisis-driven" (Epstein, 1986), in the end, made the parents more aware of the importance of their critique. All of the parents with whom we went to schools felt that having someone else go with them and witness their struggles was useful. It gave them confidence to realize that their experiences of racism, which appeared less overt, were still very bad. Rather than making direct racist statements, teachers and

administrators appeared to care deeply and sincerely about the kids' trivial infractions. Furthermore, they "cared" so much that they were willing to damage the kids' educational experiences in order to express that "care" (Rolon-Dow, 2002). The teachers' care was imaginary care for imaginary children, while real children got hurt. After leaving a school, we most often shook our heads in disbelief and anger (but we would also remark, "Everyone was so nice").

We suspect that some teachers may sometimes use rigid school policies to get rid of, even temporarily, children with whom they cannot work. We wonder if it is time for educators to reconsider the idea that every teacher must be able to work with every child in the classroom and acknowledge that not every teacher can work effectively with every child, and, as a result, schools must develop appropriate policies and possibilities for legitimate *teacher-child divorce* (e.g., by transferring the child to another classroom or school without stigma attached either to the child or to the teacher). We found that divorcing from schools or teachers was the main factor of educational success for the children with whom we worked for the year.

While institutionalizing teacher-student divorce can be helpful in many cases, it does not help to improve the situation for all children and families. Another lesson we have learned from our work with parents, children, and schools is that, for the sake of children's educational success and general well-being, teachers and parents have to listen to the children. They have to attend to and authentically care about children's voices, concerns, interests, and needs (cf. Rolon-Dow, 2002). Genuine teaching and parenting occur not when children have to listen to the teachers and parents but when everyone listens to everyone and when there is a dialogue (Robinson & Fine, 1994). If parents choose to please the school and become school conduits pushing their children to achieve unrealistic and harmful school demands, the parents may push the children toward self-destructive behavior and may lose their children.

Parents found that they wanted to share their experiences at school with others and preferably have other people go to school with them. In part, this enabled parents to hear about other situations and to understand that their experiences were not isolated. Sharing with others also enabled parents to use the skills they had developed to help other parents with similar issues. All of the parents, especially Cindy, seemed interested in attending parental meetings and using their experience to empower other parents to also make demands of schools.

Just as the kids who went to the LACC did better at interacting with others and learning with others when they were at the community center, the parents also recognized the social importance of their interactions with schools. The issues they faced were not simply the result of isolated kids having individualized problems—though certainly all kids need to be treated as the distinct individuals they are—but were also problems facing Latino/a families as a community. Thus, the parents understood themselves to be part of a community interacting with schools in the name of that

community. They pointed out that they were not isolated, both because advocates went with them and because they were, in fact, representatives of other Latino/a families who also struggled with the local schools. Furthermore, the LACC gave the parents a chance to see their children's strengths by watching them in the computer room, the homework room, the art room, and the other activity areas. The LACC also gave the kids a context in which they received positive feedback from adults. So, when things started going wrong with schools, it was easier for all involved to see where the problem was: Largely, the schools were making the problem.

Finally, we want to reflect on our participation. We have been faced with several dilemmas. First, the project took a big toll on our time. Between the end of May 2002 and March 2003 (excluding the summer of 2002), we had 12 meetings with parents, 8 meetings with schools, more than 30 phone conversations with parents (and children), and a dozen phone calls to schools and other child-related agencies (including the court). Clearly, we became another social agency subsidized by the university and our own commitment (by donation of our personal time and energy). This cannot continue for long. We see solutions for this in (a) the LACC getting funds for this type of work, a very unlikely possibility in the budgetary deficit atmosphere and current political meanness in the country, and (b) developing informal parent networks at the LACC where parents help each other. The latter sounds more realistic, although many LACC parents do not have time resources for helping each other (e.g., going to schools with each other during the day).

Our second dilemma is about our position regarding the parents' double bind of mixing advocacy for their children with a willingness to be a school conduit for the school's unrealistic, unreasonable, unsupportive, and unprofessional demands. So far, it is clear to us that we should elevate and amplify the voices of the children, who do not have much power in the adult world. But what about parents when they are in the role of school conduit? Should we keep silent about our discomfort? Should we support the parents no matter what? Should we provide alternative points of views? Should we take the children's side? Should we criticize the parents? The issue is complicated by the fact that we are not the parents' friends, equal to them, but representatives of a powerful institution (i.e., the university has a power of knowledge that is recognized by society). Although our loyalty seems to gravitate to the children, we are uneasy to criticize the parents in a role of school conduit, because we also know what they are going through.

We feel also a bit irresponsible in that we have not investigated situations in the schools our LACC children attend nor have we specifically looked into the labor and practice conditions of the children's teachers. For instance, Rolon-Dow (2002) found that a "lack of a culture of institutional caring limited the effects of individual [teachers'] acts of caring on students' engagement in school" and "trickled down to affect classrooms and individual students" (p. 187). This lack

of a caring culture limits teachers', parents', and students' interactions with one another, focusing interactions toward purely technical concerns and away from the genuine engagement and concern with personal lives that are crucial to students being understood by the teacher in a way that allows engagement in school to be meaningful to the children. Rolon-Dow points out that a "critical care" perspective, an institutional (on the part of the school) and personal (on the part of the teacher) commitment to creating the conditions that allow teachers to understand students and their families' unique needs and perspectives, is crucial to allow teachers to see how families and the children themselves already do care about education and learning (and what they care about).

Our parent-teacher-child-university conferences focusing on elevating children's strengths, voices, interests, and needs were unsuccessful. Our failure supports the findings of others that changes in school conferencing involves a long and guided process for teachers to learn any new type of teacher-parent-child relations (Minke & Anderson, 2003 in press). It is too easy to blame teachers that they are not caring. It is more challenging to examine and reveal what institutional practices and conditions make uncaring the norm, and, while genuine caring seems near impossible in the schools that many of LACC children attend, how can such practices can be disrupted and what can be an alternative (Hargreaves, 1989, 1994).

Finally, we did not achieve one of our goals of addressing parentism in our preservice teachers. We should probably work further on organizing regular parent meetings at the LACC that involve our students. We hope, however, that this chapter will help us dissolve the myth of so-called uninvolved, low-income parents that we see in our work with preservice and in-service teachers.

NOTES

1. All names in this chapter, except ours, are pseudonyms.
2. In Spanish, the word *los huevos* (eggs) has a double meaning, like the English word *balls*, which also means *testicles*. It is doubtful that the teacher meant this double meaning, but it has strong a connotation in Spanish, and it transforms the sentence into "Balls are dangerous" for the Spanish car.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

From Radical Visions TO Messy Realities: Complexities IN THE Preparation OF Urban Teacher Educators

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Most teacher educators began their careers as elementary or secondary school teachers. For experienced teachers entering doctoral programs, the transition from the world of kindergarten through 12thgrade (K–12) education to university-based teacher education can be surprisingly abrupt and disorienting (Labaree, 2003). Teachers move from being professionals in charge of their classrooms (with all of the pleasures and challenges that implies) into the relatively more passive role of the university student who receives knowledge and needs to prove mastery of it. Although there has been valuable discussion recently about the transition teachers make when their careers shift from teaching to educational research (Pallas, 2001), comparatively little attention has been devoted to how beginning teacher educators negotiate this transition (Russell & Korthagen, 1995; Zeichner, 1995).

We would like to suggest that, although not exactly part of a hidden curriculum, the experiences of new doctoral students in the culture of the university outside of their formal course work rarely receive much concerted attention. Yet even as we advance this suggestion, it is important to note that the culture of the