

Models of Education Advocacy for Latino Families

Lynn M. Dils

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Grace Huerta Ph.D, Member of the Faculty

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover how Latino families might be best helped with their requests for assistance in supporting their children's schooling. The study examined models of education advocacy for Latinos across the country through a thorough review of academic literature. I also conducted and analyzed two case studies of local Latinas who are deeply involved in education advocacy work. One of the conclusions reached was that there persists an attitude among many educators and policy makers that Latino families themselves are largely to blame for the gap in academic achievement between whites and Latinos. I discovered common beliefs among advocates and education researchers that in order to bridge the achievement gap, there must be language support for parents in the schools and educator training to foster cultural awareness and respect toward Latinos, as well as training in effective strategies in working with English language learners. In addition, schools must affect attitudes of openness and collaboration with families. My findings also included the importance of the role of support from peers and specialized advocates.

Keywords: Latino families, English language learners, education advocacy

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Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

“I want to help my children with their homework.” “I want to talk to the teacher about how my child is doing in school.” For Latino adult immigrants with children, these were stated goals of nearly every English as a Second Language student I came into contact with.

As the manager of the adult ESL program at a Latino community center, parents voiced their frustrations to me about the barriers in place preventing them from full participation in their children’s schooling. Barriers that are, at best, preventing parents from participating as fully as they would like, and at worst, keeping many Latino immigrant parents out of the public schools their children attend altogether. As a result, this action research project focuses on the following question: what are some models of education advocacy for Latinos?

Parents explained to me that knowing how to speak English and getting a good education were primary goals they had for their children. They knew that these remain two important keys to prosperity in the United States. Many of these Latino immigrant parents told me the main reason they came to the United States was to create better lives for their children, to give their children opportunities for prosperity not available to them in their home countries. This observation was echoed by other education researchers, who noted the most marginalized families often see schooling as the key to changing their socio-economic status and safeguarding their children against many of the difficulties they themselves

experienced (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Barton, Carréon & Drake, 2005; Ramirez, 2003).

The Latino immigrant parents I worked with asked for my help with the language of education. Having been an elementary school teacher, I knew from personal experience that learning English would certainly overcome one barrier, but that there were others as well. I relayed the students' desires to be more involved in their children's educations to my coworkers. When I asked about the existence of resources to direct students toward, or how we as an organization might meet their needs, I learned of two women right under my nose who had been working toward the goal of helping Latino immigrants develop individual and social agency in regard to education in the United States.

These two women were using different advocacy models to promote agency among the immigrant Latino population of Western Washington. One of my colleagues, Mercedes, was the program manager of Spanish literacy and GED preparation classes for adult Latino immigrants. She stated she saw her role as supporting children's education by educating their parents, believing teaching first language literacy was crucial in developing family literacy. Seeing their parents involved in their own educational pursuits was important for children, she said.

The second coworker, Iris, helped to found an independent focus group supporting Latino families, in which education was central. She saw her role in supporting children's education as that of helping to develop senses of agency and efficacy among Latinos. She wanted to disseminate information about the education

system as well as help parents develop the confidence and leadership needed to advocate for their children's education.

My research question was "what are some models of education advocacy for Latino families?" I use the word "model" to refer to the two women who are the subjects of the case studies presented here as being persons regarded as excellent examples of education advocates. I also use the word "model" to mean the program of education advocacy each woman is involved in to support families in their educational aspirations. By "advocate" I refer to an individual who speaks or acts for the educational needs of another.

I chose to focus my research on Latinos in part because it was the population I was working with at the time. Another reason I chose to focus on Latinos is that they are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States (Pew, 2011), and because there is an achievement gap between Latinos and other ethnic groups in the United States, with a smaller percentage of Latinos graduating from high school and enrolling in and graduating from colleges and universities (Fry, 2010).

In addition, it was my goal to learn and describe the personal histories as well as the beliefs and values of these women who have dedicated large portions of their lives to promoting education among their ethnic and cultural communities. Both women are themselves Latina immigrants, and have a combined total of more than 75 years of education and social service experience.

A third purpose of the study was to learn what additional work was needed in order to achieve equal access and equity of education for Latinos. In order to achieve

these goals, I interviewed these two participants and created case studies. I also conducted a literature review as part of this study.

The intent of the literature review was to examine what education researchers identify as the barriers to achieving educational equity for Latinos. I wanted to learn about their ideas about how to mitigate disparities and to study other models of education advocacy for Latino immigrants in the United States.

In order to get a better scope of the numbers of Latinos in the United States, I examined the current demographics of Latino immigrants both nationally and regionally. It was my aim to get a picture of the educational achievement gap between the children of Latino immigrants and their non-Latino peers.

Current Demographics of Latinos in the United States

Between 2000 and 2009 the population of people in the United States who identified themselves as Hispanic rose 37.3%. In 2000, Hispanics comprised 12.5% of the total United States population. In 2009, the percentage of Hispanics of the total population was 15.7. (Pew, 2011).

Hispanics, as a group are much younger than their white counterparts. More than 34% of all Hispanics in 2009 were younger than 18, compared with 20.6% of whites. The median age of Hispanics in 2009 was 27, while the median age of whites was 41(Pew, 2011).

Even though Latinos constitute approximately 16% of the population in the United States, in 2008, nearly one fourth of all children enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States were Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2011).

Due to the current political climate, the flow of Latino immigrants to the United States has slowed in recent years, the majority of increase in the number of Latinos in the population is attributed to native-born residents (Pew, 2011).

Populations of Latinos are growing in non-traditional regions of the country. (Shannon, 2008) South Carolina, Arkansas and North Carolina, for example saw 115%, 101% and 90% increases respectively in the number of Latinos between 2000 and 2009. (Pew, 2011).

In 2009, Washington State ranked 13th in the United States for total population of Hispanics (Pew, 2011). That year in Washington, Hispanic children made up 16.1 % of the population of elementary and secondary public schools. During the 2010 – 2011 school year, the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction reported the K-12 public school population to be 18.9% Latino.

The Achievement Gap

Success in American schools for Latino immigrants is linked to long-term prospects for college matriculation, stable employment, and/or gaining financially rewarding employment as adults (Crosnoe, 2005).

There is a gap in achievement in schools in the United States between different groups across racial and socioeconomic lines. The achievement gap can be observed using a variety of measures, including high school graduation rates; General Education Development, (GED) credentials; college-enrollment levels and college completion rates.

Forty-one percent of Hispanics over the age of 20 in the United States do not have a regular high school diploma. When looking at just the percentage of native

born Hispanics, the number is 25%. This compares to 23% of African Americans and 14% of whites in the same age bracket (Fry, 2009).

Just one in 10 Hispanics, who did not finish high school, has a GED, while the numbers are two in 10 for blacks and three in 10 for whites. The GED is seen as the best alternative path to college, military service, and vocational training (Fry, 2009).

The high school graduation rate, (89%) and college enrollment rates (46%) for native born Latino youths is similar to whites of the same cohort (Fry, 2009).

Even though nearly all Latinos say that a college degree is important in order to get ahead in life, Latinos are only about half as likely to complete college degrees once they've started (Fry, 2009).

Parent Engagement

It is widely believed that parental involvement in children's education is a key to educational success across race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Parent involvement has been linked to such wide ranging positive educational outcomes as more positive attitudes toward school, improved academic performance, higher test scores, fewer placements in special education classes and lower dropout rates (Griffith, 1998; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls & Nero, 2010; Barton, Carréon & Drake, 2005).

Types of parent engagement. Definitions and descriptions of what constitutes parent involvement vary considerably. In a 4 year long study on immigrant parents' school engagement experiences, Barton, Carréon & Drake (2005) discovered that various education stakeholders, (parents, teachers,

administrators, and policymakers), did not agree on what was meant by parent involvement.

Some researchers tended to view parent involvement almost exclusively in terms of school. Joyce Epstein (1986) categorized parent involvement in only 5 ways: fulfilling basic obligations, (providing school supplies and general support and supervision; involvement in school to home communications, (reading information coming from school to the home and attending basic school events such as conferences and open houses); involvement at school, (volunteering in the classroom or elsewhere on school grounds or on field trips); and involvement with school-related learning activities at home (Epstein, 1986).

Still others viewed parental involvement, or engagement, in much broader terms. Elsa Auerbach and Robert Moreno and Richard Valencia included a wide range of activities and practices woven into the day-to-day lives of families and tend to be invisible to other parents and educators. Involvement on the home front is more fundamental to basic childrearing, and may be directly or indirectly related to education (Auerbach, 1989; Moreno & Valencia, 2011).

Some schools and/or parent groups have increased parents' roles to include school-wide governance and collaborative on issues such as vision statements, budgets and curricula (Katz, 1999; Shannon, 2008).

Barriers to engagement. Obstacles to productive involvement of parents in their children's schools include, but are not limited to, English proficiency, employment demands, limited understanding of local education systems, mistrust and fear between parents and educators, extreme poverty, and fear of the discovery

of undocumented immigrant status (Levine & Trickett, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Language. The barrier of language that my adult ESL students bemoaned was echoed in the literature review. Language barriers can increase alienation and parent discouragement (Levine & Trickett, 2000). Parents who speak a language other than the dominant culture often participate in schools far less than their majority group counterparts (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Even immigrant parents who are fairly proficient in English may lack understanding of the highly nuanced and jargon laden language used in schools. Immigrant parents who are less proficient in English often resort to using their children as translators due to insufficient translation services in the public schools. Children are unreliable translators for parents, and may censor information (Kugler & Sobel, 2007).

My own experience with Latino parents was that they accepted responsibility for learning English, but also wanted their efforts to be met by the schools. They wanted to have regular access to school staff or volunteers who were bilingual and could help with translation of documents and instructions as well as their own communications to teachers and staff.

Mistrust, misunderstanding and fear. Lower direct participation in school activities by Latino parents has often been interpreted as a sign of not caring (Griffith, 1998; Ramirez, 2003; Katz, 2001; Auerbach, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). At the same time, parents perceive school staff as “distant, rejecting, and sometimes even hostile towards them and their children” (Griffith, 1998).

Anne Katz, in her paper on schools with diverse learners, wrote of school staff members who referred to ethnic minorities in their classrooms as “other people’s children”, and as having “no language” and not caring about or valuing their children’s education (Katz, 1999).

Teachers’ negative perceptions of ethnic minorities and low expectations that teachers have of students and their parents, not only affect the frequency with which parents engage in their children’s schools, more importantly they directly affect children’s attitudes about school and even negatively impact their English language development (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008).

Teacher hostility, rejection or distancing of parents or students has a chilling effect on parent participation and student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, Rosado 1994). Second language acquisition theorist, Steven Krashen, in his affective filter hypothesis, (as cited in Peregoy & Boyle, 2008) theorized that affective or social-emotional factors impact language learning. In order for students to learn effectively, they need to be motivated and have self-confidence and self-esteem while in a low anxiety learning environment.

The practice of assuming students from particular groups such as low income, racial/ethnic backgrounds, are destined to fail in school because they have internal deficits is known as “deficit theory.” This kind of thinking is apparent in the attitudes and practices of some educators and education researchers (Auerbach, 1989; Moreno & Valencia, 2011).

In his paper on promoting school partnerships with minority parents, Luis Rosado lamented, “Unfortunately, too many minority parents do not have the ideal

educational background to become effective teachers of their children”. “Interest and motivation are important”, he says, “but they are not sufficient to provide essential school support for their children” (Rosado, 1994).

People operating under deficit theory tend to view all ethnic minority families as placing less importance on education (Ramirez, 2003; Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls & Nero, 2010)

Deficit thinking and the consequences of perceived discrimination can lead to resentment, apathy and alienation of families toward schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Levine & Trickett, 2000).

Bridging the Gap

While the literature exposed many barriers to equity in education for Latinos in the United States, it also described many people and groups working towards equity in education and toward bridging the achievement gap.

In their paper on high performing schools serving Mexican American students, Scribner & Scribner showed strong evidence there need not be an achievement gap at all (Scribner & Scribner, 2001).

Funds of knowledge. “Funds of knowledge” is a term used by researchers Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff and Norma Gonzalez (2001) “to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being.”

Looking through the funds of knowledge lens, people are seen as competent, and their life experiences are valued as having given them the knowledge they use to

negotiate their worlds. This view sees people, even poor immigrants, in terms of their strengths and resources (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Scribner and Scribner found high performing schools serving low socioeconomic status, (SES), Mexican Americans with low English proficiency. These schools were situated along the Texas/Mexico border and had populations of at least 66% Latinos. Even though the population traditionally performed poorly on such tests, students in these schools had higher than average standardized test score and had gained both state and national recognition. Scribner and Scribner (2001) attributed their successes in part by their choices to disregard deficit thinking and instead value parents' funds of knowledge and cultural backgrounds. They collaborated with parents on aspects of education ranging from curriculum to assessment and school governance.

Another successful school with a high immigrant population in the Pacific Northwest also credits their success, in part to using the funds of knowledge approach, and adapting the curriculum to make it culturally relevant to its students and their families (Shannon, 2008).

Language. Some schools have taken up the call to bridge the language barrier and have become dual language schools, hired bilingual teachers, or additional staff to act as translators (Kugler & Sobel, 2007; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Ramirez, 2003; Shannon, 2008). In other schools, parents have served the function of language bridge for each other through organized parent groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Still other schools have implemented first language literacy and/or ESL classes for parents. Besides increasing effective communication between parents and teachers, and increasing parents' ability to function fully in English speaking society, supporting family literacy either in the first language or second language facilitates children's English language acquisition. Peregoy and O. Boyle (2008) found that, "Research shows that English language proficiency and primary language literacy contribute to the ease with which English learners develop English reading and writing skills" (p. 402).

Collaboration. In their paper entitled "Chicano Families and Schools: Challenges for Strengthening Family – School Relationships," Valencia and Moreno (2011) referred to it as a "myth" that Latino parents, as whole, do not value the importance of education. In their study on the views of Latinos and non-Latinos views of their children's school success, Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls and Nero (2010) found that Latinos valued both academic and social success in school more than did non-Latinos. Successful parent involvement programs have some commonalities: respect for language and culture, an attitude of caring, and involving parents in meaningful collaboration (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Katz, 1999; Moreno & Valencia, 2011; Scribner & Scribner, 2001 ; Shannon 2008).

Staff training. Many researchers agreed there has been a need to educate and sensitize staff to the needs of Latino students and their families (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997; Katz, 1999; Kugler & Sobel, Levine & Trickett, 2000; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Moreno & Valencia, 2011; Ramirez, 2003; Shannon, 2008).

While interviewing parents in a largely Latino community, A.Y. Fred Ramirez (2003) said, “The parents in this study wanted one thing from their children’s schools: for the schools to listen”. Other researchers saw the acts of simply reaching out, inviting and welcoming parents as important keys to increasing parent involvement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997).

Research suggests that when educators do listen, when they do get to know and understand the ethnic groups their students and families belong to, that they become more confident and effective teachers. When school personnel are culturally sensitive, they become more collaborative and caring in nature (López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

In her paper on creating culturally attuned programs for Latinos, Celia Falicov cautioned against essentializing or relying on preconceived notions of cultural values. She suggested that when training individuals in the area of cultural sensitivity, it is important to develop an attitude of “cultural humility”, which she described as “a willingness to let families teach about the specific values and traditions most relevant to their current settings.” When participants work together toward creating a culturally attuned program, a sense of shared ownership occurs (Falicov, 2009).

Contributing to their children’s schools in meaningful ways can help to foster beliefs in personal efficacy. In his paper on the psychology of human agency, Albert Bandura wrote that “unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (Bandura, 2006).

It is the sense of personal efficacy parents need in order to breach some of the barriers to equity in education. Elsa Auerbach maintained that while parents' aspirations for their children did not necessarily produce better academic outcomes, parental involvement in the form of advocacy can shape teachers' expectations of students, which in turn can influence student achievement (Auerbach, 1989).

Summary

Through my literature review, I discovered a variety of models and programs across the United States designed to address the issue of educational equity for Latinos. There is a broad range of complex social issues such as language, attitudes about ethnicity, and socioeconomic status that can act as barriers to equity. There is evidence that racist and classist attitudes of some education researchers and school personnel persisted and in themselves create formidable barriers to be breached. There is also evidence of progressively thinking, culturally aware researchers and school personnel who are doing their best to break down what have been traditional barriers and work toward true collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders in education. Most of the parent involvement programs were contained in the scope of individual public schools or within a school district. There seemed to be little similarity between the largely urban settings with large Latino populations in most of the studies I reviewed, and the setting of my research project. In the county where this project was situated, according to 2010 statistics, 7.1 % of residents claimed to be Hispanic, which translated to very nearly 18,000 Hispanic individuals. With Latino residents spread across the county and throughout the school districts, the question remained about how to organize families, and what form educational

advocacy should take. I was glad to be interviewing two advocates who were situated in this particular setting.

Chapter Two: Methods and Analysis

I chose to conduct case studies for this research project because I was interested in the real-life situations of individuals' work in addressing the issue of support for Latino immigrants around their children's schooling. I had, working in close proximity to me, two women who were working towards that goal, but approached the issue in very different ways. One woman was the founder of a parent support group for Latino immigrants. The other, a provider of adult basic education for Latinos. Each of them saw their work as education advocacy.

According to both Sharan Merriam (1998) and Irving Seidman (2006), authors and education researcher, case studies appeared to be the best method of investigation.

Methods for Participant Selection

I conducted qualitative case studies as a research method to investigate and describe the ways in which two individuals acted as education advocates for the Latino community. Both of the women I selected were colleagues of mine at the Latino community center where I was employed as the manager of an ESL program.

While consulting with my colleagues during lunch about my students' requests for help concerning their involvement in their children's schooling, I learned of the interests and efforts in education and education advocacy of the two women.

Mercedes, (a pseudonym), was the manager of a program for adult Spanish literacy and another for General Education Development, (GED) preparation. Both

were programs of El Centro, (a pseudonym), a Latino community center in the Western Washington. Mercedes had also been the manager of a family literacy program in an adjoining county.

She was a Latina immigrant, and had emigrated from Mexico six years prior to this study.

Iris, (a pseudonym), worked with El Centro as the administrator for a program designed to help prevent sexual abuse. She also provided bilingual and bicultural mental health services at El Centro. In addition, she provided direct services to Latino families in a neighboring county. My main interest in Iris's work, however had to do with the volunteer work she did with Familias Latinas, (a pseudonym). Familias Latinas was a small independent group of Latinas concerned with supporting families, especially around the issue of education.

My aim in conducting case studies was to learn from and describe the experiences, motivations, challenges, successes, insights and visions of these two education advocates.

I was well-embedded in the organization in which we each worked, which gave me relatively easy access to the participants. It also afforded me a unique position to observe and come to understand the context in which the participants spent a significant part of their professional time and energy.

Research Methods

Each week at El Centro for several weeks prior to conducting interviews, I spent time in informal discussions with each of the participants. It was our custom to have lunch together once a week. Our conversation often revolved around our

work, both in and out of El Centro. I did not record those conversations in any way. I do believe that the experience added to my general understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of the two women. I also gained understanding of their interests and motivations in regards to work and other aspects of their lives.

I conducted one two-hour interview with Mercedes, which was digitally recorded. I conducted a second follow-up interview a week later, which lasted 30 minutes. That interview was also digitally recorded. Both interviews were conducted at our workplace. Both interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy.

All interviews were a combination of semi-structured and unstructured or open-ended questions. A list of major questions is attached as an addendum.

In order to gain a second point of view and lend additional validity to the study, I conducted an interview with Lourdes, one of El Centro's founders. Lourdes helped me gain historical knowledge and perspective of El Centro and both Iris and Mercedes' work there. The interview lasted about an hour and was conducted at a local bakery. It was digitally recorded and transcribed.

While conducting research on Mercedes, in addition to the interviews, she invited me to attend a celebration and recognition ceremony for her students. I attended as a participant. I took the opportunity to talk to students informally about their experiences in the programs headed by Mercedes. I wrote field notes immediately following the event.

The interview transcriptions and field notes for Mercedes' case study were coded. Through analysis, personal background and work history, sense of purpose, inspiration and motivation for others were themes that emerged.

While conducting research for the case study on Iris, I conducted two interviews that were each two hours long. The interviews were conducted at Iris's home. Questions asked of Iris during the interviews were a combination of semi-structured and unstructured or open-ended. A list of major questions is attached as an addendum. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were checked for accuracy and Iris was given the opportunity to clarify or add information.

In addition to the cross-referencing by interviewing Lourdes, a long-time colleague of Iris's, the opportunity arose for me to attend an event hosted by Familias Latinas, the parent support group that Iris founded. It was an open, public event, and my role was that of full participant. My participation helped to place Iris's work in context and was a rich experience. Immediately following the event, I recorded field notes in a journal.

All interview transcriptions and field notes were coded. Family background, language, work history, ethics, Familias Latinas, barriers to working with the schools and dreams were the themes to emerge while analyzing the data.

In order to cross reference and provide additional validity, Iris provided me with a document describing the history of Familias Latinas.

Timeline

I began informal discussions with the participants during November of 2009 through my work at EL Centro. It was during the summer of 2010 that my research project question was solidified. My literature review was done during the summer and fall of 2010. I conducted interviews with Mercedes in mid November 2010, and attended her class graduation ceremony in mid December of 2010.

My interviews with Iris were conducted late November and early December of 2010.

Limitations of conclusion

Regarding the limits of conclusion I can draw from this study, Sharan Merriam (1998) wrote succinctly:

Because the primary instrument in qualitative research is human, all observations and analyses are filtered through that human being's worldview, values, and perspective. There are multiple interpretations of reality. The researcher thus brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. (p. 203)

Biases. I approach my own teaching with the perspective of multiculturalism, and I see my work not only as teaching English as a second

language, but also of working towards social justice. I look at the world, and thus this research project through that lens.

I recognized in myself the tendency humans have to affirm their preconceived ideas. As Seidman (2006) suggested, I worked hard to analyze the data with a spirit of curiosity and openness, rather than of testing hypotheses.

Language barrier. In the case of my interviews with Mercedes, language was a limiting factor. Spanish was her first language. At the time of the study, she had been in the United States for six years. She assured me that with my level of Spanish fluency and her level of English proficiency, we would have no trouble understanding each other. I believe that we did understand each other, but I felt, at times during the interviews that Mercedes' responses to my questions were somewhat truncated. I attributed this to the fact that the interview was not conducted in her first language.

Time constraints. If I had had more time, I would have liked to observe Mercedes' classes and interview more of her students. I would also have liked to interview additional members and Familias Latinas participants of the events of about the advocacy work they do. Talking to and observing both women as they work directly with adults around issues of education for themselves and their children would have been very valuable indeed.

Chapter Three: Findings

Setting and Participants

I came to know both Mercedes and Iris through my work with a private non-profit Latino community center in Southwestern Washington. El Centro, (a pseudonym), was founded in the mid '90s. The center had as its mission the support and enhancement of the Latino community in a three county area of Western Washington.

At the time this study was conducted, El Centro had programs for adults in Spanish literacy; General Education Development test preparation; English as a second language, (ESL); computer literacy, and a class in sewing and small business development. All classes, with the exception of ESL were conducted in Spanish. All were free of charge, and childcare provided. The organization also administered programs, which contracted with the state to provide bilingual and bicultural mental health services, parenting classes and sexual assault prevention education. GED test preparation classes and tutoring, as well as ESL classes, were also held at satellite locations. El Centro was a busy place. Students and their children, volunteer teachers and tutors and staff could be found there six days a week.

El Centro's community was largely comprised of Latino immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, though was inclusive of other immigrants, and had seen ESL students from Asia and Europe as well.

The Spanish language GED preparation program, Spanish literacy program, and the small business development class were headed by Mercedes. Mercedes is the subject of the first case study.

At the time of the interview, Iris was back at El Centro after years of absence as the administrator of a grant-funded program designed to provide sexual assault prevention education. Iris is the focus of the second case study.

Mercedes

Mercedes first piqued my interest with her ever-present attendants - young men and women who carried her books, opened doors, and generally acted as her assistants. I was not certain if I was in the presence of a teacher who had near rock star status, or if the steady stream of helpers was more a testament to her persuasive powers as a volunteer recruiter. As I became more acquainted with Mercedes, I discovered that both were true.

When I heard that several of Mercedes' students were inspired to travel 30 miles to study with her, rather than attend classes in their neighborhoods, I knew that she possessed something special, something worth investigating.

Work history. Mercedes' teaching career started early. At the age of 16 in the 1950s in Mexico City, Mercedes got her first job. Though she herself was still in high school, Mercedes convinced a desperate principal and unruly class of teenagers to give her a chance to be a high school teacher.

On seeing their prospective Spanish teacher totter into the classroom on her first pair of high-heeled shoes, the students laughed. She admonished them not to be so noisy and to listen to her:

Hey, hey, hey, please don't do so noisy, because you have to listen to me, I want that you know that I am a real poor woman and I need the job. You have to be nice with me because if you don't the principal will not give me the job. Do you want to help me?"

After getting over their initial surprise and nervous giggles, they agreed. The class had driven away four teachers before her arrival at their chalkboard, wobbly on her new professional heels, yet determined. Whatever it was, Mercedes had what it took to stick it out for the remainder of the school year.

Mercedes' gift as a teacher first emerged then. She has been recruiting, motivating, cajoling, supporting, and teaching students of all ages and in a wide variety of settings for more than 50 years. Her curriculum vitae includes teaching English to kindergarteners, special education at the middle school level, Italian at the high school and university levels, and adult basic education.

At an age when many people retire, Mercedes immigrated to the United States to live near a brother, her adult children and grandchildren. At his request, she went to work for her brother, helping in his restaurant. During her first week in the United States, Mercedes' daughter received an invitation to join the board of directors of El Centro. Being a busy mother with small children, the daughter declined,

My daughter said, 'Mom, you can go there and you will start to meet people because you are always here with us, and it's good for you.' I came and I applied, and oh they were terrible in the beginning, because they made an

interview, and they had to talk among them to tell me, ‘Yes, you are accepted.’ And so I was so happy and I accepted. So I started to come here and I started to take classes, English classes. Because the only English that I knew is the English that I studied in the school. Because we were in the secondary, so I forgot the English that I knew.

Sense of purpose. Driven by her firm belief in the power of education, Mercedes viewed education as the main way in which people could improve their lives, to ‘get ahead’. It is through education, she said, that we can understand each other. When we understand each other, we can work together, and when we work together we can accomplish more than we can when working alone.

To Mercedes, learning was a lifelong pursuit. In addition to studying English, in her 60s, she decided to become a licensed counselor in order to fill a need she saw for culturally appropriate Spanish language mental health services. The state licensure exam was in English, so not only was she responsible for knowing content, she was responsible for knowing the academic English associated with the field.

While taking English classes at El Centro, Mercedes perceived a need for students to develop Spanish literacy. It is not uncommon for El Centro beginning level English students to have completed only two to four years of formal schooling in their home countries.

Before long, Mercedes made a proposal to El Centro's board of directors to implement a Spanish literacy program similar to the one she had directed in Tabasco, Mexico prior to immigrating to the United States.

Though there was no funding for the program, Mercedes offered to volunteer her efforts in order to get the program off the ground. Still, the board of directors voted down her proposal. "They didn't believe on me" Mercedes confided. "One day I convinced them and I told them, 'you have to permit me to do this. Don't pay me anything.' That's why I was the volunteer for five years."

A position as the manager of a family literacy program pilot became available in an adjoining county. After successfully heading the program for two years, the funding was cut and the program ended. Mercedes took her proposal back before the board. By that time, the face of El Centro's board had changed, and she was given a green light.

At the time of the interview with Mercedes, she was the program director for a Spanish literacy program supported by both the governments of the United States and Mexico, in which students have the potential for receiving certificates for elementary and middle school, high school diplomas, GEDs, and have access to college. She was also the director for a program in which students learn skills related to sewing and small business development.

She had indeed proven herself to be capable to the Board of Directors of El Centro.

A major value Mercedes saw in adult education is the modeling it provided for children. “Teaching parents to read and write will help the children in school, she said, “Parents are the best and first teachers.”

This sentiment was espoused in the Johnstone and Hiatt paper about a parent involvement center that had as its core parent continuing education and social services. The ultimate goal of parent involvement programs, they stated was to motivate parents to continue their own educations in order to support their children’s academic efforts (1997).

Personal inspiration. Mercedes credited her value of education to her mother. She remembers her mother as knowing “about everything.” Both parents were very supportive of education and of reading. Sometimes however, to her father’s dismay, Mercedes’ mother read books that were not considered to be great literature, to which her mother’s response was, “Even if it is not very good, they have to read it.” It was from her mother that she developed what she referred to as “the reading habit,” even though, she said, it was not common in Mexico at that time for parents to read to their children. She told me that her mother supported her three siblings and her to “be better and do better” than she and her father, neither of whom had gone to college. Mercedes’ mother encouraged them to study. She and her siblings all studied at the university level and received professional degrees. One is an economist and accountant, another a lawyer and two are teachers. Mercedes has received a Ph. D. in education.

Their mother was an important role model to others as well. When she was 70-years-old, Mercedes' mother entered the university to study languages. Not only was she the oldest student, she graduated with top honors.

In her advocacy work, Mercedes has motivated by example much like her mother. Nearly 70-years-old herself, Mercedes received her counseling credentials. Her thirst for knowledge and appetite for new educational endeavors had not shown signs of slowing.

When I asked Mercedes about the sources of her own inspiration, her eyes lit up as she told me of one of her first students in that Spanish literacy class. "I have a student since I started, but who started in the lowest level, but they now are just about to finish the GED. Can you imagine this progress? In these few, few years?"

That student had been studying with her for six years and had been travelling more than 30 miles each once a week for four of those years for the privilege.

She told me about a couple who had learned to read and write together. They were able to read a book to their child for the first time. "They were so proud!"

Personal inspiration often came to Mercedes in the form of her students. When funding was discontinued for a literacy program she directed, Mercedes' students made and sold tamales in order pay her wages so she could continue to teach them to read and write. The students extended funding for the program for six months out of their own pockets until Mercedes found another paying position. She then volunteered her services as a teacher for the group.

Mercedes told me she also derived great personal inspiration from the volunteers who work with her as tutors and assistants. "Americans are real

volunteers”, she said. “You start the work life and end it as volunteers; it’s wonderful!”

Motivation for others. Mercedes’ practices reminded me of qualities Scribner and Scribner (2001) said were important in creating schools in which Mexican American students thrive: teachers who accept full responsibility for helping students, and teachers who were extremely caring and nurturing to students. Mercedes cared deeply for her students. She made it a point to know what was happening in students’ lives so she could support their efforts to come to class or to understand why they might not be able to make it. Commitment and responsibility are what students need in order to succeed says Mercedes. And sometimes, she believed, it took a taskmaster. Mercedes was not beneath hounding students to get them to come to class. Many students worked long hours at jobs that were physically demanding, Mercedes told me. They had families to care for. They were tired and wanted to rest in the evenings and on Saturdays, but Mercedes had been known to phone students repeatedly or even show up on their doorsteps at 8:00 a.m. Saturday morning to get them back into the classroom. She explained, “In the beginning, I am sure that many people did not love me, and I told some of them, ‘I am not here for you to love me, I am here because you have to learn.’”

The programs Mercedes headed grew steadily over the next four years. While conducting this study, I attended a graduation ceremony in which students received certificates of elementary, middle and high school equivalencies. Four students received their GEDs that afternoon. Three women donned caps and gowns to receive their certificates. A man, who had been deported shortly before the

ceremony, received his certificate in absentia. The ceremony was full of emotion as students spoke of their appreciation for their friends, families and of course, their teacher. They spoke of their hopefulness for bright futures, in part because of those Saturday morning knocks on the door by Mercedes.

I asked how she recruits volunteers. “With friends – I invite people. Any person I know who speaks Spanish, I invite if they are educated. I invite them to volunteer. I don’t lose any opportunity. And all of them are valuable to me.”

Vision for needed work. I asked Mercedes in addition to modeling, what could be done to help support the education of immigrant Latino children. She said:

I think the main, the main, the main reason that the parents don’t like to be at the school is because they don’t understand the teacher. It’s language; it is the main barrier. The second one is that the teachers don’t try to make the parents feel comfortable at the school. This is another point very important. Sometimes teachers don’t understand the culture of the parents, so that’s why they are opposite instead of understanding each other. I told you – education. Also with the teachers, if they work with the Hispanic community, they need to try to study a little bit more about the language, about the culture.... For me it’s very important.

Language, Mercedes said, is crucial. She envisioned a day in 10 or 15 years when there would be many more Latinos who speak both English and Spanish:

I have known too many American people who don't want to learn another language. They say, 'If they want to come here, they have to learn English!'. That's right, but it is one point. In 10 or 15 years there may be a situation that you are in your own country and you will not understand most of the people who are around you. For me it's very important both ways.

Another perspective. In order to gain another perspective, I talked to Lourdes, who had been a colleague of Mercedes and a founder of El Centro. In Lourdes' words:

Out of the blue Mercedes showed up. I supported her work, but I couldn't give her all the support she needed. The woman had drive. She knew what she was doing. When she couldn't do what she wanted here, she went to another county. She needed to do what she believed in. She made her dream come true. She doesn't fight for it, she just does it.

In the years that I worked with Mercedes, I found that to be true. She doesn't fight for her dreams and goals; she just does it. She also cajoles, begs, sweet-talks and coaxes others into helping her.

Iris

In order to get an understanding of how Iris developed her attitudes and beliefs on working with immigrants around issues of education, I asked Iris about her own immigration story.

“Well, the first year was hell!” Iris exclaimed about her move from Puerto Rico to the United States when in her mid 20s. She said:

I was feeling very homesick, isolated, angry. The sadness was showing, manifesting. It was not about sadness, boo-hoo. It was about anger, anger. It was my choice to come, but nevertheless it was hard at first, it was hard. It took me by surprise this new environment: the language factor, everything; the food, everything. Things were out of my control. I was not in control of what was happening around me.

Much of Iris’s professional life has been helping other immigrants have some control over their lives. She has worked with homeless people on the streets, as an educator with low-income immigrant youth in and around Washington D.C., with victims of domestic violence and with low-income Latino families providing direct social services.

In addition to her paid work, Iris founded and volunteered with a Latino advocacy group. Familias Latinas is a group of Latinas committed to supporting families, largely around issues of education. It is through her work with Familias Latinas that I became interested in working with Iris on this research project.

Family background. The daughter of a minister and a Head Start teacher, and the oldest of four children, Iris spent her early years in a small town in Puerto Rico. She explained:

My parents didn't own a house, they didn't own a car. There were not a lot of material things in my house, but there were a lot of books. It was a priority. To value education, that was really, really important in my family. The majority of my relatives went to college. There was no doubt in our minds that that was going to be an important goal in our family. Most of the women in my generation or a little bit older, they are highly educated, so that was always a role model for me, you know; no doubts about that.

I also learned from my parents that personal relationships are very important, that work you do in your community is really important and you are responsible for doing that. You know, that sense that is not 'by the way', but is very intentional; that you are responsible to improve your community – by participating in groups or by being a leader.

My house was open to a lot of people in the community, so I grew up with people who were from other different backgrounds and religions.

You value education and that personal relationships are very important. I learned these two lessons from my parents. I didn't learn them in school, not at all.

The sense of responsibility to improve her community was a lesson she took to heart. Iris has spent her whole professional life working towards improving her community of fellow immigrants. She has worked with immigrants from a wide range of countries, but the Latino community remains nearest and dearest to her heart.

When I asked her why she left Puerto Rico after graduating from college, she replied, “I think I was ready to move on and see something different.” While in Puerto Rico, she had fallen in love with a man from the Pacific Northwest, so, she said, moving to the Pacific Northwest was the most compelling choice.

Thirty years later, there was still a note of homesickness in Iris’ voice.

Language. For all the immigrants I know, language is fraught with emotion, including the struggle of learning of a new language, the forgetting of elements of the first language, the isolation a language barrier can produce, the homesickness, and ties to cultural and national identity.

Language was a strong theme throughout my interview with Iris. In the telling of when she learned English, Iris relayed the story of getting her start in public school. She described their English school books:

The images of the American kids were always tall and skinny – white, always, and they had swimming pools, nice houses and always a pet. I think that that starts working on your psyche; and of course living in a colony. Being a product of a colony you always consider yourself inferior. All of those images of tall people, blonde people, white, wealthy people, start affecting how you think about the United States and how you think about yourself. I do remember that ‘oh, they’re all tall and skinny. They’re all beautiful.’

Iris retains a political awareness of language use. She told me all of the Familias Latinas events are conducted in Spanish, with English translation for those who need it:

I think it's a great opportunity for English speakers to be in that position where they need and interpreter, where they need to put their headphones on – to be in that position. I think it's very humbling, and it's a great experience – where they are not the dominant group.

When she moved to the United States after having graduated from college with a degree in humanities, Iris described her English proficiency:

My English was not that great. I never went to ESL classes, never. So the English I started to acquire was from my partner. My vocabulary, my lingo is all based on his lingo. Whatever word he doesn't say, I don't know. But you know, when you start working with others, reading and going to school... It took me some years, I can't tell you how many – the moment you don't think in your first language. It happened at some point.

At the time of the interview, Iris spent most of her days with native Spanish speakers. "It has been good for me to work with people who speak Spanish because I have to, I have to speak Spanish every day."

Extolling the virtues of learning languages, Iris told me she thinks learning a second or third language is highly beneficial. “It’s definitely good for your interpersonal relationships – you know, you can communicate with one another. But definitely, I think it’s very good for your brain.”

Work history. As a child, and as a young adult, Iris did not have grand dreams of what she wanted to be when she grew up. Her professional path seemed to grow organically – each phase informing the next.

Regarding moving to the United States after graduating from college with a degree in humanities, Iris expected to teach Spanish. She added, “Then that changed again and again and again and again.”

After a couple of years in the Pacific Northwest, Iris and her husband moved back to Puerto Rico to try to make a go of it. Her husband had teaching credentials and taught ESL in a school where they both found jobs. “We decided to come back, because financially we were not going to be able to make it there. Living in Puerto Rico is hard; unemployment is always high. It is hard, so we decided to come back.”

They moved back to the Pacific Northwest where Iris enrolled in a university in order to get teaching credentials. She entered the program, but did not complete it. “It was a very isolating experience for me,” she said. “I was the only person of color in the program. It was not a very welcoming environment. There were a lot of barriers.”

Iris found camaraderie and employment at a Latino community center. There she worked with the homeless population.

With her husband and young son, Iris moved to the Washington D.C. area where her husband was working towards his Ph.D.

There, Iris worked with a different group of immigrants: a youth center for refugees from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Ethiopia. They provided services of GED preparation, ESL, and job placement. Of the experience, she said:

So, it was a whole group of marginalized people. It was a great experience in terms that I was working with a very new community. I learned about the struggles, the issues, all of what it was to be a young person coming from El Salvador or Nicaragua trying to adjust to this culture, but not quite fitting. It was a great learning experience for me.

Unfortunately, for Iris it was a difficult place to work due to the mismanagement and financial woes of the organization. Her next job was with a school district that ran an adult education program for English language learners, (ELLs). There she also did vocational work and assessment with people from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Bolivia, Peru, and Vietnam.

After her husband was finished with graduate school, they moved back to the Pacific Northwest. Iris's professional path took a bit of a turn. She got a job working with a different marginalized community: victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. "I did that for nine years. It was a long time. I did that till I decided to go back to school to get my counseling degree. I got my Masters in Counseling."

With her Masters degree, Iris started doing social work. In addition to working at El Centro part time doing work to prevent sexual assault, she currently works for a government agency providing direct services to immigrant families.

It has never been my goal to have a private practice. I enjoy being a social worker. I like direct services. I like to work with the families. I like to go to people's homes. I like to help people with something that is going to be basic, is basic for that person to survive. I really love that.

Sense of purpose. When talking to Iris about her work experience, it was impossible to separate her core values of the importance of personal relationships and of responsibility to her community. Iris's thoughts about leadership are also inextricably linked to her professional identity.

About working with marginalized communities she spoke about the danger of stereotyping, even when one has the best intentions:

I think it's important when we're talking about any community, we need to be reminded that yes, there's a community, but they're all individuals. And there's community within communities. That's why I like to use the plural form: 'Latino communities', so we're not really forcing. And we can do that, [essentialize], in good faith, even when that is not the intention. That's why I think that interpersonal relationships are very meaningful.

It's important if I really want to work with x or y community, I think it's really important that I really interact with people from that community - not only my clients, but people who are my peers. Because the risk of doing that, [of interacting only with clients], is that unconsciously I could only consider that community as clients, as people who need my services.

In his paper on parental involvement of Latino immigrant parents, Ramirez (2003) wrote about the value of human relationships in increasing both the quantity and quality of home-school interactions. It has also been shown that as they get to know parents, teachers gain confidence in their efficacy to teach children (López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Familias Latinas. It seems to follow quite naturally that Iris has been involved work with Latino families on issues around education.

When thinking of Iris's work with Familias Latinas, I heard an echo of the lesson of responsibility her parents taught her: "you are responsible to improve your community by participating in groups or by being a leader." Iris has both participated in a group and acted as a community leader.

Familias Latinas was conceived when Iris was a graduate student doing a counseling internship with Latino families. One experience was particularly instrumental in developing the direction her advocacy work was to take:

I was doing home visits. The parents were like, 'I have all this stuff coming from school and I don't know what it's all about.' It was stuff from book

fairs to special ed. and everything in between. I thought ‘Oh my gosh, this is a big deal.’ And so I started to ask the parents, ‘How do you know that your kids are doing well?’ They didn’t. I would go with the families to translate when schools were in the process of developing an Individual Education Plan, (IEP). And I thought, ‘This is a big deal! How do you convey information like that? How do you tell the parents? How do you tell the school where the parents are coming from?’

I remember the school referred me to this kid. This kid definitely was experiencing a psychosomatic situation. The kid was not talking in school. There was nothing medically wrong with her, nothing. She was eight-years-old. What happened? The parents were almost getting ready to pull her out of school to be a maid for the family because they thought this kid isn’t going to learn. So, I asked the parents, ‘What happened during the interview with the school that is giving you the impression that this kid is not going to learn because she is not speaking. She is speaking at home, but not in the classroom. She was not always like that, so I asked the parents ‘How did this start?’

They said, ‘Well, we went to a teacher-parent conference and they told us that our kid had the brain of a five-year-old, and that this kid is a burra.’ A burra is a donkey. And they went home, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they started talking like that, you know, ‘You’re not going to learn, you’re a burra.’ And she stopped talking at school. And that really shocked me. It was about how the information was conveyed, how the

parents understood, or misunderstood, the information, and how it affected the kid. And I thought, ‘This is wrong, this is really wrong.’ I think this is how all these ideas got started, [for Familias Latinas].

At around the same time, Iris was asked to facilitate an information gathering session to determine how immigrant parents were engaging with their children’s schools. Iris coordinated what she thought would be a one-time event. There was a larger than expected turn out of 15 parents. They answered the survey questions and wanted to know when the next meeting would be.

A second meeting was scheduled. Parents wanted to talk about the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, (WASL), and about bus routes. The group wanted to expand the parent base to include the other two local school districts. “That’s when we started using our current location. We wanted to change the location to make it more inclusive and more accessible.”

Seeing how hungry parents were to gain information and to be listened to, and having seen some serious misunderstandings occur between parents and school personnel due to language and culture, Iris decided to make proposals to the three local school districts become a consultant for the school district. She proposed to become a school-community or school-family liaison. About her proposals Iris said:

They were polite; they were all polite. They listened. It was pretty much the same proposal. Initially there was interest, but no follow-up whatsoever.

They said that number one, there was no money and number two, that there weren't enough Latino students [to warrant a paid liaison position].

Upon learning of her proposals to the local school districts, two of the original group members became suspicious of Iris's intentions:

They felt I was in this only to benefit myself. Pretty much what they said was, 'If you really want to be an agent of change, if you really, really want to benefit the community, you need to work outside the school district. If you work as an employee of the school district, you will need, pretty much, to follow the rules. You're not going to be as independent; you're not going to be as powerful.

That is how the steering committee was created. It ended up being a good thing. That's how this group took more ownership. It's a grassroots effort. And in that way to develop leadership and as a group to be the spokesgroup to provide advocacy, information and education to the families.

We are able to support each other, to mentor each other. It's a beautiful thing. And to develop leadership with a whole group of people who would never have the opportunity like that because they're not part of the mainstream. They don't have the credentials, they don't have the education, they don't have the language to be part of the system.

We keep organizing these events and growing as members of the group. It has been very positive to be able to keep a core group of people over three to four years. These people must be very committed.

It was an interesting juxtaposition to me: Iris described the group as creating leadership in the arena of self-efficacy, but it is leadership completely outside the schools. Levine and Trickett described characteristics of individual parents that make effective education advocates: assertiveness, confidence, dissatisfaction with present conditions, persistence, a sense of entitlement to desired changes, and awareness of the potential to actively advocate for educational goals. In her description leadership being developed inside Familias Latinas, I could imagine those qualities being developed. The group provided what Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2010) referred to as “social capital”, in which each member of the group is strengthened by their ties to the others. They supported each other, consulted with each other, informed each other, and generally empowered each other to advocate for themselves and their children.

When I asked how often Familias Latinas hosts activities or events, Iris told me that, “There are some years when we have more than others. This year we have committed ourselves to four events.

The group has planned activities and events based on feedback from the previous events. All of the activities and events had taken place in Spanish. If attendees or presenters needed it, translation from English to Spanish was provided. Childcare was always available; food was always provided. She added:

We wanted to bring food that people would enjoy; that we as a culture would enjoy. We also wanted to support women in the community who cook. People really appreciate the fact that on Friday they come straight to the event rather than going home, because you know, once you're at home, you don't want to go out again. The venue is important. It's in a place where everybody knows; there's a room for the kids, and the meeting room is big with lots of tables.

We're not an agency; we're not a non-profit organization. We have a little bit of money. We pay a stipend for people who need it. That has been very important to support people who need it because not everybody can afford to volunteer. When the money is gone, it's gone, and the need will still be there. Whoever is left will continue. We need to keep moving, moving, moving.

Of course we will always work in partnership with others. We network; we collaborate with other groups such as the OSPI. They have been very supportive. They lend us their interpretation equipment, which is very expensive. The Hispanic Commission is always very helpful, and the Office of the Education Ombudsman. We'll keep moving on because we know that this is important whether the school districts are with us or not. Or maybe they will join us later on. It doesn't matter. We need to keep the movement so that's how it's working out.

Barriers. One of the barriers to working with the schools that Familias Latinas has had is that there are three local districts in the area, with a total of 52 schools. The Latino population is spread out between them. None of the individual schools has an ELL population large enough to warrant its own program. Some children just happen to attend those schools that house ELL programs. Others either get bussed to schools with ELL services, or they opt not to receive services at all and remain in their neighborhood schools.

And then, as Iris put it: “There’s a lot of red tape out there. One of the first lessons for us as a group was that if we were going to use a school building, [for meetings and events], we couldn’t bring our own food.” They would either have to pay for the school to prepare food for events or not provide food at all. The group was able to find a non-school venue that was centrally located, with few strings attached, and at no cost.

Another barrier Familias Latinas has encountered with the schools is lack of access to individual schools. “Maybe it would be different if we already had a relationship with a school principal who is educated on these issues and is much more flexible and much more open. Then maybe they would not put a lot of red tape out there.”

Iris may be correct in her assumption about success they might have in reaching out to principals. In their paper on a school-based parent center for Latino families, Johnstone and Hiatt (1997) stated that the principal is the key player in establishing the tone and culture of a school. He or she is the one whose responsibility it is to reach out to families and the community.

One story about trying to do outreach for an open meeting for Latino families illustrates a barrier of a different nature. Familias Latinas decided to have an open meeting at one of the schools with a relatively higher proportion of Latinos. They approached the district about sending invitational fliers home with students. In order to send fliers with students, the district office needed to put their stamp of approval on the flier. Even then, Familias Latinas was not allowed to distribute the fliers to individual schools; the district would do that, they said, though their initial answer was “no”. The reason given by the administrator, Iris recalled was, “No, if you’re going to ask us to distribute these fliers on your behalf, on the behalf of your group, we can not discriminate against Vietnamese families or families of other ethnic groups.”

Iris told me: “The purpose of Familias Latinas is to work with Latino families. We shouldn’t feel like we have to excuse ourselves for that. There is a lot of red tape when trying to access the school system.”

Dreams. Iris shared with me two of her dreams:

I don’t know if Familias Latinas will go for it or not, but I have been thinking for many, many years about having a homework club. There are other homework clubs in the area, but I don’t know why the Latino kids are not benefitting from this. There are many factors: there is location, how they recruit, outreach. Parents are not really being invested in the need, but nevertheless, they ask, ‘How do I help my kid with homework, with reading, with math, all of that. I think we should have a homework club.

And if we can not have it the entire school year, could we have a summer school where it's very intense. Because that's when they say that kids start lagging a little bit. It's when there's nothing, there's no formal activity. They're not practicing their reading; they're not practicing their math. We're talking about parents who don't have a lot of formal education, so even when they try, they still need a lot of help.

At the end of the second interview, I asked Iris if there was anything else she's like to say. She spoke of her desire to pass on her experience and knowledge to others who might be informed or inspired by her work with marginalized community. "We didn't learn this in school ... I think it could be useful to others."

Another perspective. In order to gain another perspective on Iris's contributions, I interviewed Lourdes, a colleague and co-founder of El Centro:

The first services that we [El Centro] had – it was leadership for women through programs for young women, (like adolescents), and ESL. We had bake sales or money from our pockets for both of them. And Iris was the man for it. She was the woman! And the lack of funding never stopped us. We operated on blood, sweat and tears, no funding.

Access to services and partnerships in the community: that became the essence of El Centro. I've always called her the goddess

of direct services. There's the vision and then, things to *do* with that vision. Iris is *that* person!

So, she [Iris] is always drumming to reality and to be humbling with folks. She would say, 'Let's see how many people we can get to this meeting, and not people that are in our executive position, but how many people who need the services can we get?'

Iris's work is very concrete. She facilitates the communication between the parents and the school and calls things what they are: 'This is not a deficit, it's a barrier', and 'How can we solve that within a partnership?'

Education was a focus from the beginning. We knew that without advocacy, the people that we knew [young Latina immigrants] would never get into education. The ratio of providers to people is so off, is so totally off. Those coming to this country with professional leadership are very few.

We ask, 'Do we need to support all students at the middle through high school levels – all Latinos, all immigrants, or do we need to support one kid from kindergarten through medical school?'

Analysis

As is evident in the two case studies, Mercedes and Iris had different perspectives and worked as education advocates in very different ways.

Their backgrounds are similar in that they are both Latina immigrants and came from middle class families that placed a high value on education. Both women made careers out of serving people, and have ended up working for the same organization, but their perspectives are quite different indeed.

The two women seemed to embody the two conceptualizations of parental involvement described by Moreno and Valencia (2011). Iris's perspective fell into that which saw parental involvement as a matter of parental control, of parents being included in decision-making at all levels of the education system. The long-term focus, they said, was to develop a more inclusive system and to change the structural conditions that perpetuated poverty.

The other perspective, which describes Mercedes' work, was oriented more towards parent education. This view saw the major goal as educating parents by providing them with the proper tools as dictated by the existing system. This view extends the school framework into the home (Moreno & Valencia 2011).

A big difference that I saw between the orientations of the two women was that Iris was rooted strongly in the social/political world. Even before becoming a social worker, Iris saw herself as rooted in community. In her work with the homeless, with refugees, low-income immigrants and victims of domestic violence, Iris saw the issues in terms of larger political forces at work. Nearly all of Iris's stories of her work had to do with groups of people rather than of individuals.

Iris's socio-political perspective is echoed in her role as an education advocate. As an advocate, Iris works with parents and other community members in order to increase their expectations of efficacy; it is the provision of leadership that has been the key element of Iris's work. It is through developing efficacy and leadership, she believed, that parents and their supporters are more likely to advocate for themselves, children and other members of the community. This view is supported by Auerbach (1989), who stated, "These [parents'] aspirations per se did not influence [student] achievement, parental willingness to advocate for their children (talking to teachers about academics, and so on) did... Parental involvement is important because it shapes teachers' perceptions, which in turn, influence student achievement."

Mercedes, on the other hand, was very much oriented toward individuals. She viewed her advocacy work in terms of education and motivation. There is one quotation of hers that echoes frequently: "I am here because you have to learn!" The stories of advocacy she relayed to me were of knocking on an individual's door to get them to come to class, or of teaching one couple to read, so they in turn, could read to their child. She saw the importance of parents working towards learning to read and write or working towards a GED, largely as being that of modeling for children the importance of education and of teaching parents what they need to know in order to support the work of schooling.

Many parent involvement programs described in my literature review took similar approaches by focusing work on providing educational opportunities for

parents such as parenting and language classes. This role as parent educator, either on the part of schools or on the part of Mercedes, seemed parental in nature.

Neither advocacy role Mercedes or Iris had included direct work with schools children attend. Even Iris's dream of providing a homework club or summer school for Latino children was outside the school.

I attributed this in part to the demographics of the area. As I stated earlier, the population of Latinos was not concentrated geographically. Working with an individual school, or even school district, would not have been inclusive of the Latino population as a whole.

In Iris's case too, there was a history of mistrust of schools among the early support group she was instrumental in forming. The issue of mistrust was repeated several times when talking about undocumented immigrants. The political climate at the time of the research was viewed as being very anti-immigrant. Iris told me of members of Familias Latinas who were afraid of advocating for their children too strongly for fear of reprisal for being undocumented.

Both Mercedes and Iris had some anger and frustration with the local schools. The schools, in their view were not taking the initiative that they needed to in order to work effectively with Latinos or other marginalized communities. They both told me that it was the role of school staff to educate themselves about Latino culture. "The schools have everything they need to do that," Iris said, "It needs to work both ways," remarked Mercedes.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This research project demonstrates the existence of effective models of advocacy for Latino families. The models I studied varied in their elements due to the particular communities; beliefs, resources and motivations of the individuals involved. There are common themes and strategies as well as differences.

Implications For Advocacy Model Design

Demographics. Although it addressed the topic of education advocacy, my research project and the work of the participants, was situated in very different communities than most of the literature I reviewed. According to the 2009 census, 15.7 percent of the population of the United States identified themselves as Hispanic (Pew, 2010). Most of the literature I reviewed was situated in communities in which the Latino population comprised a substantially larger percentage. The Ramirez study, for example, was based in an area of Southern California where nearly 90 percent of the population was Latino. In the Shannon study, which was situated in a school district in the Pacific Northwest, where the percentage of Latino students was 70 percent.

My research project was based in an area of the Pacific Northwest where the percentage of residents who referred to themselves as Hispanic on the 2009 census was 10.2 percent. In 2010, the three school districts in the area my research was conducted in claimed Hispanic students in the following percentages: 15.2, 8.4, and 7.4 (OSPI, 2012).

As Iris discovered, a relatively small population can make for difficulty in organizing and advocating. The local school districts she approached used insufficient population size as one reason not to hire her as a school-Latino family liaison. The difficulty in organizing was illustrated when working with Familias Latinas, Iris organized a meeting for Latino parents in the local school district with the largest percentage of Latino students, (2,153), and only 15 parents attended.

Another example of the difficulty for Latino families living in a community with relatively few other Latinos, was given by the adult ELL students I worked with. They complained of feeling “all alone” at their children’s schools, and that there were no bilingual staff or other parents around to help facilitate communication between them and teachers or other staff.

While Latinos living in communities with larger populations of other Latinos may find it easier to organize parent groups, the adage, “there is strength in numbers,” did not necessarily translate into education equity for Latinos in education. In Ramirez’s paper *Dismay and Disappointment: Parental Involvement of Latino Immigrant Parents* (2003), he wrote that parents did not feel listened to nor their children cared for. The community he wrote about was 90 percent Latino in a historically Latino community in Southern California.

Many of the parent involvement programs I learned about through my literature review, were school-based. Some programs included such classes as ESL for parents, job skills training and GED preparation for parents (Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997; Kugler & Sobel, 2007; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). In an area

with Latino student populations averaging 10.33 percent, it is unlikely that school-based programs would have enough resources or participation to flourish.

I recommend that Latino parent organizing be done in individual schools, as well as at the district and at the regional levels. It seems from the response Iris got in approaching school personnel at the district level in this locale, organizing and advocacy would need to come from parents themselves or such advocacy groups as Familias Latinas rather than from the schools.

Language support. A common theme with both of my research participants and the literature review was language support. Mercedes said in her interview the main thing keeping parents out of their children's classrooms was difficulty in communicating. She believed parents needed to learn to speak English, and school staff needed to learn Spanish, especially in areas with large populations of Hispanics.

Iris did not address language in the schools specifically, but did talk about the importance for Familias Latinas events to be conducted in the participants first language: Spanish, so that there were no barriers to full communication and understanding due to language for the target group.

Most of the research papers I read for my literature review cited the importance of having language support for Latino parents in order to encourage and facilitate their participation and understanding. The research of Levine and Trinckett (2000) showed language accessibility to be an influential factor in the advocacy efforts of most parents. Some schools represented in the literature review instituted and/or recommended dual language schools in order to teach children most effectively, but also to aid in communication with and participation of parents (Ryan

et al., 2010; Shannon, 2008). In large urban areas of two research areas, school-based parent support centers had ELL classes for parents in order to foster communication, model adult learning for children, and to draw parents into the schools (Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997). Still other researchers advocated the hiring of bilingual school staff, including parent-school liaisons (Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997; Kuegler & Sobel, 2007; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha). Delgado-Gaitan (1991) wrote about the value of parent-initiated language support at the school level. Ramirez (2003), who looked at a largely Latino community in a large urban area, suggested there be a bilingual advocacy group to oversee school and district decisions and policies.

In this area of the Pacific Northwest and in other areas of the country with similarly-sized Latino populations, due to resource and budget restrictions, it is unlikely that schools will hire bilingual family-school liaisons, even though that would be my recommendation. In the economic and political climate at the time of this project, I think a more likely strategy to aide in parent-school communication, would be parent peer language support at the school level with the additional support of bilingual staff or certified interpreters hired by the school. I would also recommend states highly encourage language learning by teachers and other school staff of the most common languages of its immigrants. This could be done as pre-service or ongoing education for staff.

Parent accommodation. Both of the research participants involved in my project spoke of the importance of accommodating parents' busy lives by holding events or classes during times when parents were most likely to be able to attend.

Iris, with Familias Latinas, held events in the evenings and had both child care and dinner available for parents. Mercedes conducted adult education classes in the early mornings, evenings and Saturdays in order to accommodate parents' schedules.

Several of the education researchers whose literature I reviewed, wrote about the importance of schools accommodating parents' schedules by conducting meetings in the evenings and/or on Saturdays (Griffith, 1998; Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997; Levine & Trickett, 2000; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Scribner & Scribner, 2001).

I agree with Iris, Mercedes, and the aforementioned researchers and recommend teachers and other school staff, make accommodations for parents' schedules in order to give them full opportunity to engage in events and in basic communication. Having been a classroom teacher, I know that additional evening or weekend hours can overtax already overworked employees. There should be some sort of compensation for time spent after regular working hours.

Teacher training. Mercedes and Iris both spoke of the importance of teachers and other school staff having adequate training in order to understand and respect cultural values and traditions of the families of the students in their care. Iris spoke about the danger of stereotyping and the importance of recognizing there is not just one Latino culture. She also spoke about the importance of teachers or others who provide services to Latinos developing personal relationships with members of the community served.

Increased connection between families and schools boost teachers' expectations of parents' participation in their children's education and teachers'

appreciation of parents as partners (Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997). Teachers also benefit by personal relationships with parents by becoming more confident in their efficacy to teach immigrant children (López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

All of the literature I reviewed promoted increased training in order for educators to be culturally sensitive to the children they teach and their families. Falicov, in particular wrote in detail about the need for those working in the social services outside their own cultural communities to demonstrate cultural humility. “That,” she wrote, “is a willingness to let the families teach them about the specific values and traditions most relevant to their current settings” (p 300).

Additional research recommends that educators be trained to view parents as resources (Griffith, 1998) and to learn about parents’ belief systems and daily lives in order to make their children’s schooling more relevant to immigrants (Auerbach, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Griffith, 1998; Katz, 1999; Kugler and Sobel, 2007; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Shannon, 2008). There is not much mention, however of how educators should be trained to view parents as resources or how they should learn about parents’ belief systems or daily lives.

One school I researched received support from a non-profit partner in order to implement an initiative with several components in order to help achieve equity and access for immigrant families. One way in which the non-profit group helped was to guide teachers in action research to increase their understanding and skills in building partnerships with immigrant families. Those teachers who participated in action research presented the findings to their colleagues. Of the teachers who

participated in action research, many reported improvement in the academic achievement of their students as they became more skilled at connecting with parents.

In another school district with a majority of Mexican students, the superintendent traveled to Mexico each year and visited schools in order to better understand the families he worked with (Shannon, 2008).

Some education researchers suggest that teachers visit families' homes in order to understand their students' lives better, particularly families' funds of knowledge or strengths, cultural values and beliefs (Moll, et al., 1992; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2010).

Pre-service and continuing instruction and training for teachers in cultural diversity are important steps to help create awareness and understanding for educators. Directives for training should come from the state level, within local school systems, and if warranted, from concerned citizens, including parent advocacy groups. I also recommend teachers hold family nights in addition to or instead of traditional open house events, which are most often one-way relays of information from teachers to parents. Family nights would be opportunities for teachers and families to get to know each other, as well as for families to get to know each other. In order to bring Latino immigrant parents into the school, personal invitations have been shown to most effective.

Collaboration. Most of the literature I reviewed promoted true collaboration with immigrant parents (Auerbach, 1991; Carréon, et al., 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Griffith, 1998; Johnstone and Hiatt, 1997; Levine and Trickett, 2000). Griffith

(1998) reported parent involvement is highest when teachers have positive attitudes towards parents, communicate openly and work collaboratively with them. In Kugler and Sobel's study (2001) they wrote that immigrant parents wanted true collaboration rather than just information and assistance regarding their children's schooling.

There were examples of immigrant parents being included as important collaborators in schools. In a school district that was 70 percent Latino, Shannon (2008) described a cadre of stakeholders in the district, of which parents were a significant part, whose task it was to develop a vision and plan for their school district. Katz (1999) wrote about an elementary school with a large Latino population that developed a site council comprised of the principal, other staff, and parents. This site council worked on such weighty issues as the school budget and curriculum. Professional development training was available to parents who wished to participate. Scribner and Scribner, who wrote about a school in a largely migrant Latino population, also described parents successfully participating in school governance.

Shannon (2008) called for the sovereignty of schools for minority students. I would echo that call, at least in some regards. Classrooms and the schools they are situated in need to have some autonomy to create culturally situated curriculum that is meaningful to students, their families and the communities they live in.

Recommendations To Educators And Education Advocates

As a result of this research project, I have recommendations to make to individuals and groups who are or would be education advocates for Latino

immigrants. I also have recommendations for schools in order to achieve more equity and access to education for Latino immigrants.

First and foremost, my recommendation for both advocates and schools is to listen to Latino immigrants. Communication about education needs, values, and goals are paramount to Latinos succeeding in education. One important key to communication is to bridge the language barrier. Schools should take the responsibility in this regard. Bilingual, bicultural school-family liaisons would be my recommendation were money not an object. In lean economic times, however, that may not be realistic. In any case, in culturally diverse school systems, every effort should be made to hire bilingual and/or bilingual staff members or to provide language and cultural awareness training for existing staff. My recommendation for advocates would be to push for these changes. Another recommendation would be to ask for help from the schools in organizing bilingual and bicultural parents and/or volunteers to help with translation and interpretation of both documents and oral communication. If schools are not willing to help organize, it would be up to advocates and parents to utilize whatever resources and outreach available, including parents, other family members, community groups, colleges and universities, and community members as volunteers.

For all schools, regardless of its Latino student population, I encourage the accommodation of parents' schedules by first, asking parents what measures would facilitate their participation, then offering meetings and events during those times, be they evenings and/or Saturdays. In order to ensure parents receive information about school events, a combination of direct communication, fliers, emails, phone calls,

and public service announcements via radio or local newspapers is advised.

Providing snacks or meals and childcare if appropriate is also encouraged. Again, if schools themselves, do not undertake accommodating parents' schedules, I would advise advocates to promote such measures. Advocacy groups, also, should make every attempt to accommodate the schedules of their members.

I recommend that cultural awareness, sensitivity, and anti-oppression training be requirements for pre-service teachers. In addition to pre-service training, I advise all educators receive continuing education in these areas. Training foci should be consistent with current and emerging populations of ethnic, cultural and language minority groups. At the individual district and school levels, training needs to be done in collaboration with the community it serves. Latino children and their families, themselves should be encouraged to participate and lend their voices, as well as local Latino community groups. As was shown in the literature and voiced by my participants, the building of personal relationships between immigrant families and schools is invaluable. Advocates can certainly aid in this endeavor by offering schools encouragement and organization. As was described in the study by Kugler and Sobel (2007), I recommend schools collaborate with area colleges and universities by guiding teachers in performing action research in their classrooms in order to learn how best to work with the children in their classrooms and their families.

In order to foster collaboration with Latino parents, schools must adopt an open door policy. I also recommend schools include Latino parents and other marginalized communities, in planning and decision-making at all levels of school

endeavors, from the classroom to the state level. Latino parents should be not only given a voice, but power as well. I advise schools be given more autonomy in order to make curriculum and school operations meaningful and appropriate to the populations they serve. Advocacy groups can help by offering leadership classes to parents as well as helping schools to facilitate training on specific issues. They can also help by pressuring school administrators to have a seat at the table.

Collaboration also should happen at the classroom level. I advise teachers to work with children and parents to help develop curriculum consistent with families' goals, interests and areas of knowledge. I recommend other family members and Latino community groups be included as resources for the classroom and school.

Further Research Needs

As I conducted this research project, questions arose, which remained unanswered by either the literature review or the case studies. These questions deserve additional research to continue the search for the most effective methods of advocating for the education of Latinos. Agreement with Mercedes' premise that parents' continuing education has a positive effect on their children's academic achievement is one that I did encounter in the study by Johnstone and Hiatt (1997). There was an assumption being made by a parent involvement center that supporting parents' efforts towards their own education was important in order for them to support their children's academic efforts. There were no studies cited to back up the claim. In the Auerbach (1991) study, a link was made between parental willingness to advocate for their children and their children's academic achievement due to teacher's perceptions. Additional research should be conducted to examine the link

between teachers' perceptions of children and their long-term academic success.

Finally, I would like to see additional research which examines educator responses to advocacy efforts made by parents, advocates and advocacy groups. I wonder about the efficacy of such efforts, as well as the effect on educators' attitudes and behaviors toward the ELLs they teach.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Informed Consent Agreement

I, _____, hereby consent to serve as a subject in the research project entitled, "What are the ways in which two immigrant Latinas serve as education advocates for Latina/o families?" It has been explained to me that the purpose of this project is to gather information about my motivations, strategies and insights in working with Latina/o families around education.

I have been informed that the information gathered will be used for a thesis project by Lynn Dils for her Master of Education program at The Evergreen State College, and that any additional uses of the project in the future will require my explicit consent.

I understand that the risks to me are minimal. I also understand that the identities of my colleagues, as well as individuals or families I work with will remain anonymous.

I wish for my comments made during interviews and observations to remain anonymous. _____.

I hereby give Lynn Dils my consent to publish my name as a subject of this research project, though may withdraw consent at any time during the project until publication. _____.

Lynn Dils has informed me that there will be no compensation for my participation. She has agreed to provide a copy of the final draft of her paper.

If I have any questions about this project, or of my participation in it, I can reach Lynn Dils at 360-561-0782 or by email at paralynn@gmail.com. The person to contact should a problem arise as a result of my participation in this project is John McLain, Academic Dean at The Evergreen State College, Library 2002, Olympia, WA 98505: 360-867-6972.

I understand my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and that my choice of whether or not to participate will not jeopardize my relationship with The Evergreen State College. I am free to withdraw my permission at any time before or during the project. I have read and agree to the foregoing.

Signature _____
Date: _____

Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your own school career.
2. Tell me about your family of origin. What were attitudes about school?
3. Tell me about your work experience.
4. What motivated you to work with Latinas/os?
5. What are your current motivations to do the work you do?
6. What have been some stumbling blocks?
7. How do you think your efforts have been received by administrators? Other school staff?
8. What have been some of your successes?
9. For people working with Latinas/os, what do you think it is important for them to know and understand about culture?
10. What do you see as impediments for Latina/o families becoming/being involved in public education?
11. What are some strategies that teachers/schools/districts/states/federal government have implemented for involving Latina/o families you've seen that have not been very effective?
12. Have there been policies or strategies or have served to alienate families?
13. What are some strategies that have been effective?
14. What advice have you given to families in regard to their involvement with schools?
15. Are there some general cultural attitudes that Latinas/os have regarding education?
16. What are variables among the Latina/o population that effect differences in attitudes and practices regarding education?
17. Are there activities that families can engage in apart from school that would have an indirect positive effect on school success.
18. What kinds of support would help immigrant families with those?
19. What effect do you think the current anti-immigrant political movement has on the psyche of Latinas/os?