

# Parent–School Engagement in a Public Elementary School in Southern Arizona: Immigrant and Refugee Parent Perspectives

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## Abstract

This project invited parents who spoke languages other than English at home to share their perspectives (in their native languages) with the elementary school their children attended. The researcher—a volunteer at the school affiliated with a local university—collaborated closely with school staff on this project. Using a funds of knowledge framework, parents were asked about their goals for their children, their children’s strengths, and things they taught their children at home, as well as things they liked about the school and concerns they had. Results revealed that parents had high respect for their children’s teachers and often saw themselves as collaborators with the school. They viewed themselves as responsible for teaching children respect and manners and the teachers as responsible for academic growth, which at times caused misunderstandings with teachers, who expected parents to support children in specific, academic ways. In addition to sharing how much they believed teachers loved their children, parents expressed interest in maintaining their native languages and concerns about not understanding communication from the school. The following article describes themes in the interviews as well as recommendations based on parent feedback. It also discusses ways the school and the researcher worked together to address this feedback. This research provides a model for other schools wishing to solicit immigrant and refugee parent perspectives, as well as a model for university–school collaborations.

Key words: parents, parent–school relationships, immigrant and refugee family engagement, home–school communication, university–school collaboration

## Introduction

A wide body of literature has explored how relationships between parents and schools impact children’s academic and social well-being (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Georgis, Gokiert, Ford, & Ali, 2014; Murrah, McFarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2015). Not surprisingly, the consensus is that children thrive best when their parents are positively engaged in the schools they attend. However, parent–school engagement can be a time-consuming process for schools. Delgado Gaitan (1991) notes that schools are typically not rewarded for involving parents, and as a result, parent–school engagement is often not a priority. In addition, parents are often brought into schools only when a problem comes up, limiting the school–home relationship to emergencies and disciplinary issues (Delgado Gaitan, 1991). When school staff are not aware of immigrant and refugee parents’ expectations, experiences, and ambitions, they may misinterpret these parents as inadequately involved in their children’s academic lives.

Staff members have struggled to engage with parents of students at Cactus Grove Elementary (a pseudonym), a high poverty<sup>1</sup> Title I elementary school located in southern Arizona with a high percentage of immigrant and refugee families. Teachers report that several times a year, they invest a lot of effort into inviting parents to school events, offering meals and prizes as incentives, only to be disappointed by low turnout. In the 2015–16 academic year, since the school did not make “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) as measured by students’ standardized test scores, the school was mandated by the state of Arizona to offer a certain number of parent outreach hours. Even with this requirement, teachers did not feel parent engagement increased, reporting that only one or two parents tended to show up for events at the school. This trend was discouraging to the school staff and teachers, but until the current study began, parents had not been invited to dialogue with the school about their engagement. In this article, I present the results of a collaborative project which aimed to discover immigrant and refugee parents’ perspectives on family–school relationships. The project specifically sought to understand the perspectives, expectations, and funds of knowledge of linguistic minority families—including refugee as well as immigrant families—and to promote more equitable relationships and mutual communication between families and Cactus Grove Elementary.

For this project, I interviewed immigrant and refugee parents at an urban public elementary school in southern Arizona and then transcribed and analyzed the interviews using a funds of knowledge framework (Diaz, Moll, &

Mehan, 1986; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The following article describes important themes taken from the parent interviews, which a team including staff and parents subsequently used to develop a family–school–community engagement plan that privileges immigrant and refugee parents’ voices, ideas, and funds of knowledge.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

### Funds of Knowledge Framework

In their 2005 edited book *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*, Gonzalez (an anthropologist), Moll (a scholar in education), and Amanti (a teacher) introduced the construct of funds of knowledge as “based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (pp. ix–x). As a theoretical construct, a funds of knowledge approach seeks to bring immigrant families’ wide variety of knowledge to classroom settings. Family’s funds of knowledge, cultivated through their social and economic histories, can become cultural resources for teachers, who can “include parents and families in the formula for educating children and seriously listen to and value their funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 150). Funds of knowledge include families’ strategies for survival in everyday life, including sharing family chores, economic strategies, household knowledge, religious ceremonies, transborder knowledge and travel, extended family networks and social life, formal and informal literacy customs and practices, intergenerational interactions, and ethnic identity. In sum, life experiences are the basis of these funds of knowledge, and teachers can build curriculum and relationships based on the knowledge of the children in their classroom. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti collaborated to train teachers to follow this framework by interviewing families and constructing curricula based on students’ funds of knowledge. However, few studies have used the framework to consider parent engagement (Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe, & Traynor, 2017).

### Defining Parent Engagement and Agency

As Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) began a case study of how three immigrant parents in a high-poverty urban setting were involved with their children’s schools, they realized that researchers and participants lacked a common understanding of parental involvement. Carreón et al. distinguished between parent *involvement*, that is, the specific things parents do, and *engagement*, or parents’ orientations to the world and how those orientations frame the things they do. Parent involvement typically refers to parent participation

in school-organized activities, such as parent–teacher conferences, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, and field trips, in which parents typically have “minimal opportunities to help make decisions, voice concerns, or effect school change” (Carreón et al., 2005, p. 468). Parent engagement, on the other hand, includes not just what parents do in the school, but describes “parent school involvement practices embedded in cultural spaces” (Carreón et al., 2005, p. 468). In other words, engagement is a more equitable type of involvement which takes into account the perspectives and ideas of parents as well as school staff.

Parent agency or efficacy, defined as “a parent’s belief that he or she is capable of exerting a positive influence on children’s school outcomes” (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992, p. 287), has been found to influence parent engagement in elementary schools. But even when parents feel motivated to engage with their children’s school, they may not have the opportunity or “institutional legitimacy” (Kramsch, 2016) to do so. Carreón et al. (2005) pointed out that immigrant parents may find that “the space for engagement is not equitable” (p. 470) and their social capital is not recognized. Other focus group data (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Delgado Gaitan, 1991) has concurred that members of marginalized or minority groups (such as indigenous parents) experience feelings of being “an outsider who is expected to ‘fit’ with the demands and expectations of the school” (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 499).

### **Overcoming Barriers and Building Equitable Relationships**

Sometimes, immigrant and refugee families’ circumstances can lead to barriers to their participation with their children’s schools. Carreón et al. (2005) reported that “adaptation to life in the United States is particularly challenging for poor and undocumented parents who have difficulty finding a job that pays a living wage and must cope with the physical and emotional stress of establishing a new life in a culture that welcomes their labor but rejects, openly or covertly, their presence” (p. 469; see also Hayes, 1989; Yoshikawa, 2011). Other barriers include racism (Murray et al., 2014) and lack of understanding about how minority families already engage (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) suggested that educators “can help address non-school-related barriers to learning” (p. 679) by leveraging social resources and collaborating with community-based institutions.

Though it is important for educators to be sensitive to challenges parents may face, a sole focus on parents’ *barriers* to engagement with schools can be problematic and disempower parents. A focus on deficit models, which Delgado Gaitan (1991) defines as “depict[ing] inactive parents in the schools as incompetent and unable to help their children because they have a different

language, work long hours away from home, belong to different ethnic groups, or are just not interested” (p. 22), may belie immigrant parents’ deep investment in their children’s education.

Ultimately, along with the considerations described above, building relationships with schools requires a lot of work. In a community–school partnership that Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) described, parents attributed the program’s success to the sense of trust (*confianza*) that they developed while participating. Taken together, the current literature shows that although schools often try to involve parents, they do not always succeed in engaging with parents and giving them equal power as decision makers (Carreón et al., 2005). More research is needed on how to give parents positions of power and decision making within schools. Interviewing parents in their native languages might be an avenue for bringing parents’ voices into decision-making in schools and help educators gain a deeper understanding of families’ perspectives, cultural capital, goals, and concerns related to their children’s education.

### Gaps

Through this literature review, I have identified several gaps in the body of research on engaging families with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. First, little literature is available that includes the voices of families with refugee backgrounds, a growing population in the U.S. Though refugee background families may share linguistic minority status with immigrant background families, their experiences may be categorically different. In this context, for example, immigrant, Spanish-speaking families have an established network and connections with their home countries, while refugee background families may be the first generation to live in the community (see Sanchez 2014, for a discussion of the categorical differences between immigrant and refugee families). Second, though the literature on barriers to engagement is enlightening, strengths-based research could help schools more effectively collaborate with parents. Previous funds of knowledge studies have highlighted immigrant family strengths but have usually applied the knowledge to curriculum for children, rather than to parent relationships. Finally, many of the parent engagement studies were conducted with federal funding or through grants, rather than through grassroots efforts. Grassroots explorations of family engagement can help schools inquire into these issues even without grant funding. In addition to data about parent perspectives, a framework is needed that would allow schools and communities to conduct similar research in their own variable contexts without the need for substantial additional resources. If schools conduct their own research using such a framework, they will not only learn about perspectives in their own unique contexts, but also build relationships with families in the process. The following study aims to address these gaps.

## Research Design and Methods

### Goals and Research Questions

This study adopts a qualitative approach which draws upon a funds of knowledge framework (Diaz et al., 1986; Gonzalez et al., 2005) to analyze interviews at a public elementary school with families who speak languages other than English at home. The purposes of this project were (a) to understand parents' needs and perspectives as shared in native language interviews, (b) to use the information parents shared in order to develop approaches to better meet the needs of parents that speak a language other than English at home, and (c) to develop democratic home–school engagement in the school community. The following research questions arose from these goals:

- What funds of knowledge do non-English speaking parents have that the school staff may not be aware of?
- What do parents who speak a language other than English at home like about the school their children attend, and what concerns do they have?
- How can Cactus Grove Elementary school, specifically, and elementary schools, in general, more effectively and democratically collaborate with parents who speak languages other than English at home?

### Study Context

The research took place at Cactus Grove Elementary, a public magnet elementary school in southern Arizona. At the time of the study, I volunteered for three hours a week at the school, organizing lunchtime mentoring groups with fourth and fifth grade girls and teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to parents and caregivers of children in the school. I was also affiliated with a public university, through which I applied for IRB approval and grant funding to compensate parents for participating in the project. I speak English and Spanish bilingually and had positive relationships with school staff. A majority of the teachers at Cactus Grove Elementary, including the principal at the time, were native speakers of English. However, several teachers, instructional assistants, and staff that work in the office, cafeteria, or as crossing guards were bilingual Spanish–English speakers, and many spoke Spanish at home.

At the time of the study, 86% of Cactus Grove's student body identified as Latino/Hispanic, 6% as White, and 4% as African American. In 2014, 85.1% of students were eligible for free/reduced lunches (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The school offers breakfast and lunch daily to children. Many of the children who attend the school speak Spanish at home. In addition, refugee families from Africa, the Middle East, and other regions have moved to the district after being resettled in the city. They tend to live in apartments near

the school and speak a variety of languages at home, most commonly Arabic. Academically, according to the Arizona Department of Education Accountability Division, the school ranked in the fourth percentile compared to other Arizona schools in 2014. These ranking were based primarily on test scores and resulted in the school being required to meet strict benchmarks, including a parent engagement requirement, which mandated the school to dedicate hours and events towards activities for parents. The parent English class partially fulfilled this requirement. In addition to the engagement requirements, teachers genuinely wanted to improve communication with parents. Through my volunteer work, I developed a relationship with the school principal and some teachers who were excited about this project.

### **Participants**

Parents at Cactus Grove Magnet Elementary School who speak languages other than English at home were invited to participate. The majority of these parents came from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries. Other parents came from Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Russia. I personally invited adults attending the ESL class at the school as well as parents of children in the girls' lunch groups I mentored. In addition, teachers distributed flyers to parent volunteers and parents of children attending ESL classes.

Parents were offered the option of participating in an individual or small group interview depending on their preference, availability, and, in the case of non-Spanish speakers, the availability of interpreters. A total of 16 parents or caregivers of children at Cactus Grove Elementary who speak languages other than English at home participated. I conducted 11 family interviews (2 focus groups including 7 total participants and 9 individual parent interviews), plus one interview with a teacher (in addition to informal conversations with several teachers during parent events), for a total of 12 interviews. Interviews took place in parents' preferred language in a private room at the school. Some participants had arrived in the U.S. within the past few months, and others had been living here for several years. Some participants were documented, and others were not. The interviews sought to understand parents' strengths, things they appreciate about their child's school, and any questions or concerns they had. I personally interviewed parents who speak English or Spanish, and I used adult interpreters (typically family members or family friends) to interview parents in Swahili, varieties of Arabic, and Kinyarwanda, compensating parents and interpreters modestly for their participation with the support of a grant from the university.

### **Data Analysis: Immigrant Families' Funds of Knowledge**

After obtaining consent, I interviewed parents using a list of semi-structured questions (see Appendix) based on Gonzalez et al.'s (2005) funds of knowledge framework. These questions were designed to make parents comfortable and help them talk freely about themselves, rather than feel that they had to provide "accurate" answers. In addition, the questions listed follow-up themes that future interviewers can use to clarify or ask for elaboration. I first asked parents what they believe their children's strengths are inside and outside the classroom. Next, I asked what they believed their own strengths are as parents, such as things they have taught or passed on to their children of which they are proud. Then I asked parents to talk about what they like about their children's school and teachers, concerns they had, or things they did not think are working for their child in the classroom. After conducting the interviews and transcribing each one, I coded them and identified themes that multiple participants had raised. I organized these themes according to the funds of knowledge framework (e.g., family strengths and knowledge, language and literacy practices) and added additional categories as necessary. These themes, which are reported below, arose commonly from the interviews and are related to the research goals and questions.

### **Ethical Issues**

Because it was important to ensure that parents as well as school staff understood the research objectives and felt that the results would be helpful to them, I went through four layers of permission for this project. I obtained permission from the school principal, the district school board, the university IRB, and the individual parents participating in the interviews. Parents received consent documents in their respective native languages. I provided a report of results to the district administration and teachers, and we discussed them and followed up with parents. Finally, in order to safeguard my own subjectivity, I made sure to share the reports with the school staff engaged in the project and, whenever possible, share my results with participants to verify that the themes that I was identifying did indeed reflect their perceptions. For example, I approached participants with whom I had a relationship as part of the ESL classes I taught and asked them to verify my perception that they felt very grateful for the teachers' efforts but found the lack of communication in their own languages highly concerning, and they confirmed this was the case.



## Findings

Following the research questions and funds of knowledge framework, findings were organized into themes based on the following categories: home and strengths (family, family activities, family learning, home duties), school engagement, concerns (bullying, language concerns, employment and economic status, dietary restrictions), school and community relationships (teachers, volunteering), parent perspectives (what parents want the school to know, gratitude, language), and, finally, teacher perspectives.

### Home and Strengths

#### *Family as Strength*

When parents were asked what their children's strengths were, the most common answer was "family." Parents cited their children's participation with the family, naming "family," "being at home with us," and "focusing on school and family" as strengths. They also listed their children's interests, including folkloric dance, mariachi and Christian mariachi, confidence, hard work, sports, focus on school, and dreams as strengths. Parents often talked to their children about their dreams and knew what they wanted to do when they grew up. One parent said, "Tienen sueños, y que bueno. Yo les apoyo lo que ellos quieren en lo que ellos deciden hacer" [They have dreams, and that's great. I support them in whatever they want, in whatever they decide to do].

#### *Family Activities*

Families indicated that they considered time spent together to be a strength, and all of the parents who participated in the study named "going to the park" as something they enjoyed doing with their family. This may have been a common response because there is a large park within close walking distance of the school, and the climate of the region makes going to the park possible all year. In addition, weekend community events are held at the park, typically free of charge. Parents said they played at the park, hung out, told stories, and picnicked. Parents also described going to church together on the weekends. One parent said, "En las tardes comemos todos juntos. A veces los fines de semanas vamos a la iglesia o vamos a algún lugar, pero siempre estamos todos juntos" [In the afternoon, we all eat together. Sometimes on weekends we go to church or someplace, but we are always together]. Parents also listed swimming, reading or helping children with homework, eating together, going bowling, camping or visiting relatives, going to movies, having family game nights and family movie nights, baking or cooking together, and cleaning the home together. The parents described talking a lot to their children. They talk about their friends,

what they will do when they grow up, and give their children advice. One parent said, “Yo los ayudo hablando con ellos, aconsejándolos, hablando de como está afuera, saliendo de la casa y hablándoles sobre la escuela” [I help them by talking to them and advising them, telling them how it is outside, leaving the house, and talking to them about school].

### *Learning at Home*

Parents described teaching their children a lot of things that they didn't learn at school. According to parents, one of the most important things they teach their children is respect for others. One refugee father said he teaches his eight children “how to be respectful of others and how to get along with people, because that's really important in our culture, we have to respect each other.” Other parents reported teaching their children self-respect and respect for others, to value family and friends, and to work hard. Parents also teach their children their own language and culture. One parent said she teaches her children to cook because “Imagínate que algún día vayan para nuestro país, y ellos no sepan ni qué comen allá, y que invitan a alguien” [Imagine if one day they go to our country, and they don't know what they eat, and they invite someone to dinner].

### *Home Duties of Children*

Parents also considered time together doing household tasks as a family strength. Children of participants were involved in a variety of household duties. The parents saw these chores as an important part of bonding with and raising their children, not just a way to complete household duties. One parent said that “Pues en la escuela no van a ser responsables a cien por ciento entonces también enseñarlos ayudar con la educación en la casa” [In school, (the children) won't be 100% responsible, so we also have to teach them to help with *educación* (manners) at home]. Another parent noted that “Now they are young, but one day, they will grow up, and they will need to know how to help us.”

Parents described a number of household chores that their children help them with, including folding clothes, cleaning the living room, cleaning their room, washing dishes, cooking, and yard work. Parents seem to view these activities as a way to teach their children. One parent said about her daughter: “She helps me with [folding clothes and cleaning], so it's good for me because she's always with me.” Another parent noted that her children's responsibilities are to do well in school and clean their rooms, but “when she has time, or when she wants to do it, she helps me at home.” The parent noted that even though the tasks are difficult for her daughter, “I allow her to do it because she needs to learn, so I allow her to do whatever she wants to do to help me.” Parents also described how their children help “without hesitation,” enjoyed helping take

care of younger siblings, and “everything related to the house, to the family, we’re very close. We’re very close.”

A majority of parents in the study shared that their children help them a lot around the house. The parents are proud of their children’s willingness to help out, and they view the chores as a bonding activity and a way to teach their children useful life skills while spending time with them, rather than a means to a cleaner house.

### **School Engagement**

Though the school reports very limited attendance at school events such as conferences and math nights, many parents reported visiting the school twice a day to walk their children to school. Some parents sit with their children outside or during breakfast before the day begins, sitting on benches or under trees and watching the children play on the school playground. In addition, parents report that they particularly enjoy the “fiestas” that the school puts on, including Oktoberfest in September, a rodeo cookout in February, and the Fiesta de las Flores in May. School staff say that parents who don’t usually participate in events like conferences and math night attend these events and volunteer for 15-minute sessions in booths set up in the school courtyard. During these events, children dress up and perform folkloric dances which they practice for several weeks at school. The highlight of these events, according to multiple parents, is seeing their children perform and walking around to see their artwork and writing displayed in the hallways. Extended family members also come to these events, especially the Fiesta de las Flores event, including family from Mexico.

### **Concerns**

#### ***Bullying***

Despite parents’ appreciation for the school, they shared some concerns. One concern was bullying. A parent shared that her child was bullied on the bus, for example. In her case, a teacher advocated for the child and helped her write a letter, leading the school administration to take action on her behalf and stop the bullying:

A veces ni el chofer puede hacer mucho porque el chofer apoyó a la niña mía también y el le dijo cuando ella hizo la carta le dijo muchas gracias dijo porque me ayudaste con esto porque ya no podía con los niños y así vio que él sentía apoyo con la maestra y así entonces el del bus esta muy contento también porque pues para él no podía con los niños. [Sometimes even the driver can’t do much because the driver supported my girl

also, and when she wrote the letter, he said thank you so much, because you helped me with this, because he couldn't do it with so many kids, and you could see that he felt supported by the teacher, and so he was really content as well.]

Parents acknowledged that some staff at the school, like bus drivers, sometimes do not have authority to take action alone and need institutional support.

### *Language Concerns*

Parent interviewees also expressed concerns for inadequate staffing, particularly staff members that speak their language. They indicated that they wished their children's teachers had more assistants and that more staff spoke Spanish. Parents explained that they received a lot of communication from the school, including flyers, letters, emails, and phone calls. However, almost all of this communication took place in English, leaving parents concerned that they will not know whether the voicemails that they receive are about emergency situations or normal news from the school. Parents who spoke languages other than English and Spanish were particularly concerned about communication, as illustrated by the following interview segment:

Interviewer: Do you have communication with the school?

Participant: Yeah, they call.

Interviewer: In your language?

Participant: No, in English.

Interviewer: Do you understand them?

Participant: No.

### *Employment and Economic Status*

Parents also expressed concerns related to their socioeconomic status. Parents were concerned about finding employment, and one shared that she could not afford the required uniforms for her two children or clothes and shoes that they wanted. The parents who mentioned their concerns about the uniforms seemed to be not just concerned about the financial burden of affording the required "uniforms," khaki pants and navy blue shirts. The school provided her children these uniforms through donations, but the parents remained concerned that they were unable to meet the school's expectations for attire. Parents seemed equally concerned that they were unable to provide their children clothes and shoes that other kids wore.

Another parent shared that she lived too close to the school to qualify for a bus but that walking her children to school was a hardship for her because it prevented her from taking a job. In addition, the one-way walk to school took over a half hour because she was injured, meaning she spent over two hours a day walking to and from the school.

### *School Understanding Dietary Restrictions*

Parents had concerns about the cafeteria food which didn't take into account their religious or dietary needs. One parent mentioned that his children didn't know which options contained pork, which they do not eat for religious reasons. For this reason, he said that his children sometimes did not feel like they could eat the school food. He asked for the food to be more clearly labeled so that the children could choose pork-free options. This is also important because nearly 90% of the children at the school received free or reduced lunches, but some parents felt tension between accepting the subsidized resource and maintaining the diet their families follow.

In addition to the concerns listed above, individual parents listed a number of other concerns as well, ranging from concerns that children were required to change schools each year when they move to a different house to the general lack of parent engagement and parents not taking advantage of resources that the school offers. Parents also shared concerns that fights are not resolved by the principal, or that they did not receive follow-up information about how a conflict involving their child had been resolved. Furthermore, parents were concerned that many programs the school used to offer, such as International Baccalaureate (IB) and Spanish classes, are no longer available (partially, a teacher explained, due to state mandates for meeting AYP, but also potentially due to the well-documented English-only policies in southern Arizona). In addition, one parent volunteer complained that the playground, which doubles as a public park on weekends and evenings, was sometimes not suitable for children. She said that it was often littered with beer bottles and other "things not suitable for children" on Mondays and requested that it be maintained.

### **School and Community Relationships**

#### *Teachers*

Parents spoke extremely highly of their children's teachers, for whom they have respect. When asked what they liked about the school, most of the participants' first answer was "the teachers." The parents said that the teachers "take care of" and "love" their children. Other parents said the teachers "are so focused on the kids" and "want the kids to be ready to go in life." Parents also said they believed the teachers "teach the kids really well." Parents said that their children "always talk about their teachers, how nice they are and stuff like that." They also appreciated how teachers communicated with parents when a child was sick and did not tolerate children making fun of other children. One parent expressed appreciation that teachers make sure that children do not leave the school or cross the street unattended.

One refugee mother described her appreciation for teachers as follows:

[The teachers] take care of the kids like their own children, and this school is secure. It's safe and a clean environment for the kids, and they usually get a lot of...um, respect and...behaviors from the school. Like when they come home, they act, like the way they act, like nice because they [have been] with those people, like to take care of each other.

Another parent noticed "the way that [teachers] talk to kids and treat them," saying that they "treat them like they're their own kids." Another parent mentioned that when a family member was incarcerated, the school staff were aware of the situation and were very supportive of the family. One parent volunteer described the school as a "big friendly home" with teachers that are "on the same page" with each other.

Parents were aware that the teachers faced challenges and pressures over grades and standardized testing. One Spanish-speaking parent and school volunteer described the perceived pressure as follows:

I think passing tests, and just like all teachers, they all want their children to pass and have good grades, so I think that's the pressure that they have. I don't feel like we're, like, low on our school here, or you know, they just, teachers have that instinct, where they want their kids to be just all, of course, A's and B's. You're not going to have them all like that, but that's where the pressure is that I see.

A parent volunteer also recognized that teachers provided a lot of resources for students from their own pockets, even though they are not paid well. She noted that teachers invest "a lot of hours and let alone stuff that they don't get paid and that they got to take out of their own checks to purchase, like I said, for the students here."

Parents did note that they wished that they could go into their children's classrooms and see what they do during the day. One parent said,

Sometimes I ask [my daughter], "Oh what did you do in the classroom?" and she says, "Oh the teacher read a book," and I'm like, "That's it, for five hours?" and she's like, "Yeah." So I'm like, "I don't think so," but I don't really know what they do in the classroom.

This parent would like to know how she can visit her children's classroom, not because she does not trust the teachers, but because she wants to have an idea of what the children do during the school day. Another parent shared that she wanted to observe the school to understand how to better help her children. In her words, "La verdad estamos buscando estrategias cada vez para poder ayudarle a nosotros mismos, a ellos, a los maestros, y a los alumnos."

[The truth is, we are always looking for strategies to be able to help ourselves, them, the teachers, and the students].

### *Volunteering*

A few of the parents participating in interviews had also volunteered at the school. Parents who had volunteered at the school described their experiences as very positive. They chose to volunteer so that they could be close to their children during the day. Sometimes, volunteers were later hired to work as monitors or aides at the school. The parent volunteers said that they really enjoyed their time and felt like it helped them get to know other staff members at the school. Parent volunteering duties included making copies and helping in the cafeteria, but one parent said she would be willing to teach children Spanish if she had the opportunity.

## **Parent Perspectives on School–Family Engagement**

### *What Parents Want the School to Know*

At the end of the interviews, I asked parents what they wanted school staff to know about them or other families that speak languages other than English at home. Parents want staff at the school to know that they are grateful for the teachers, happy that their children are attending the school, and always available to help and support their kids in anything. When asked what they wanted the school to know, one parent said,

Pues que sepan que siempre estamos dispuestos a ayudar a la escuela, apoyar a los niños y que pues que cualquier cosa, cualquier problema que este que haya en la escuela que nos lo comuniquen, y nosotros vamos a ayudar con eso. Pero que sepan que siempre estamos dispuestos a ayudar a la escuela, igual si hay problemas por los niños y que nos tengan informado siempre. [Let them know that we are always available to help the school support the children and anything, whatever problem there is in the school, communicate with us, and we will help with it. But let them know that we are always available to help the school, even if there are problems with the children, and they should always keep us informed.]

Another parent in this focus group added, “Pero siempre en el idioma que necesita, porque como dice ella si nada mas es una persona imagínense no hay gente que traduzca y tu tienes una emergencia” [But always in the language that we need, because as she said, if it is just one person, imagine if there is no one to translate and you have an emergency]. Another parent also wanted the school to know that even though she doesn’t speak English, she loves people and making new friends.

### *Gratitude*

Many parents expressed gratitude for the school. One refugee father said he was “excited” and “very happy” that his eight children were able to get an education, which he never had. His adult daughter interpreted for him, saying,

He is just grateful that his own kids are getting an education, because he has, like, two come here, and he has actually eight kids, and all of them go to school except the small one. And, yeah, and he says thank you for your time, and he’s really glad that you interviewed him.

A few parents observed that, since their children had been attending this school they are doing better. As one expressed, “they started, like, to learn more, and they started to have friends...now they are in this school, I don’t know, they feel more comfortable around others, and they interact more with the people, and they have a lot of friends, and they feel loved.” They also appreciated extracurricular activities, such as a program that allows children to walk or run a mile each day, recess, special classes, and the afterschool enrichment program.

### *Language*

Language was a very important theme for parents. They described feeling that it was difficult to understand their children’s teachers because of language. They also wished that there were more staff at the school who spoke their language and that they could receive more communication from the school in their own language. Families’ home language varied. Some parents asked their children to speak their native language so that they would not forget it. Others allowed their children to speak English at home. One parent explained, “I don’t take it away from them because English is very important. I have lost a lot of good jobs because of lack of English.” Some parents had experienced discrimination because of their limited English proficiency. One woman was not paid for her work, and when she sought help from the Labor Bureau, the employees asked her how she expected to come here when she didn’t speak English. Parents with refugee backgrounds also shared that they were proud of their small children for being able to translate for them.

Parents reported that “the best thing they learn is English” and that they really appreciate how well their children speak English. At the same time, many Spanish-speaking parents expressed a desire for their children to learn Spanish at school as well as at home. The parents shared that they wished that the school still offered Spanish classes, not just because it would allow their children to learn, but also because “the kids that speak Spanish feel more comfortable” when they can display their knowledge of Spanish. Parents also considered that their children could get better jobs if they are bilingual and that one “can speak



well with everyone everywhere, and it's a really good thing to know so we just speak both languages."

These data suggest that parents really appreciate the English their children learn at school, but they also really want their children to continue to learn and use their home languages. This is true for families who spoke commonly taught languages, like Spanish, as well as for families who spoke less common languages, like Kinyarwanda, which has less instrumental value in Arizona.

### **Teacher Perspectives on Family–School Engagement**

While a comprehensive review of teacher perspectives on parent–school engagement was beyond the scope of this study and could be examined in the future, I wanted to offer teachers the opportunity to share their perspectives. To do this, I informally spoke with a few teachers during parent outreach events and conducted a one-hour interview with one teacher, Samantha (a pseudonym), who had been working at the school for four years and had worked at another school in the community for five years prior. Samantha noted that "parent engagement is one of the hardest things here, in my opinion." She reported that the PTO only had two parent members, and fewer than 50% of parents in the school attended parent–teacher conferences, even after scheduling them and making multiple attempts to contact parents. However, parents and extended families attended festivals and events that showcased their children's talents, such as folkloric dances.

Like the parents, Samantha also reported that one of the school's biggest strengths were teachers who "genuinely care about their kids" and "work really hard to help the kids be successful" at everything from academics to meeting basic needs like food and clothing. She, for example, took her students on nine field trips that academic year, each one of which required writing an individual grant to cover costs. When parents were informed about these trips, which ranged from visits to an art museum to hiking, many volunteered to chaperone. A picnic at the park was one of the most valuable field trips. Fourth graders went with their kindergarten reading buddies and parents, and Samantha said that she got to speak with and get to know parents during this time.

Samantha identified several strengths of the school's immigrant and refugee families. She noted that families had a lot of caregivers and cousins, and they often had grandparents living with them or very close. Samantha thought that children benefitted from having so many caregivers, although, laughing, she reported that it sometimes meant that children didn't know to which of six caregivers' homes they should go on a particular day after school. She also noted that refugee families seem to be particularly grateful and appreciative of things they got to do at the school, reporting a "noticeable difference" in their levels of appreciation when compared to non-refugee families.

However, she also identified some frustrations, the first of which involved testing: “I think we have a problem here, and I think the family and the culture has something to do with it. I feel like the parents are too trusting that the teachers will handle everything.” Samantha realized that this trust does not stem from neglect of parental roles. While in school, she learned that parents in some cultures view teachers as professionals and admitted that “we want to be seen that way.” However, she said that when it comes to academics, “it needs to be more of a partnership.” A lot of kids are struggling academically, and she said she worried that students would fall behind if parents were not more involved.

Samantha said that she gave out her cell phone number to all her students’ parents, and this has been the most successful way of maintaining communication. “Families may not read English even if they speak it,” she told me, and materials are only sent out in English and Spanish, anyway, leaving out families who read other languages. However, some parents have access to text translating apps. She said, “Parents won’t read anything that goes home, but parents know that they can text about things,” and said she answers texts at home and even texts parents from school with children to report good behavior instead of signing behavior sheets. Overall, as Samantha’s remarks indicate, she and the other teachers recognize parent and family strengths, but teachers and parents have a different understanding of how parents can most helpfully be involved in their children’s academic growth. In addition, she acknowledges that the school can lose funding based on test scores, a fact parents may not realize.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Parent interviews revealed that parents are highly invested in their children’s education and see themselves as collaborating with school staff to educate their children. Although sometimes teachers did not perceive parents as fully involved academically, this perceived lack of engagement may have resulted from parents’ respect for teachers as professionals and not understanding how they were expected to participate in academic activities. Parents’ perspectives on learning their children engaged in at home suggest that they view themselves as teaching their children things that they do not learn during the school day and thereby collaborating with teachers to holistically educate their children.

Parents reported spending a lot of time outside of school with their children, talking to them, playing, and teaching them household skills and hobbies. A majority of participants described teaching their children their native language, respect for others, and appreciation for family. Parents felt satisfied with their level of participation in school events, even though school staff did not feel

many parents participated, and parents particularly enjoyed events which displayed their children's academic and extracurricular skills. Teachers reported that simple field trips, such as a lunch trip to the park where families spent time on weekends, provided valuable space to get to know parents. Parents expressed gratitude for their children's teachers and concerns for limited communication in their native languages and unclear follow-up about conflicts involving their children.

This study has revealed ways that the school could privilege parent voices. After gathering results, I shared them with the school staff and recommended focusing on engagement events which allow children to display their work and talents, rather than informational events or education fairs. I also recommended that the school involve parents in planning these events and in discussing policy. Language policy, in particular, should be addressed. I also recommended that the school and parents on the engagement team consider ways to incorporate other languages into school or to capitalize on students' linguistic knowledge. In addition to these longer-term goals, I recommended that the school work to share news with parents in their native language and inform parents about how they will plan to communicate in cases of uncommonly spoken languages, such as Kinyarwanda. Finally, I suggested that the school address parents' concerns, even concerns that they cannot "solve" immediately, and that teachers and staff communicate openly about expectations, rather than assuming parents are not involved or do not care.

The teachers responded positively to this feedback. They addressed concerns about food labeling in the cafeteria immediately. Though the school offered pork-free options daily, they were not labeled, so the staff worked with food services as well as cafeteria staff to make sure the food was clearly labeled. They also deliberately considered ways to include students as apprentices during classroom tasks and procedures and, particularly, ways to highlight their multilingualism. This democratic engagement is important because, as Gonzalez (2004) notes, "the funds of knowledge of a community occupy that space between structure and agency, between the received historical circumstances of a group, and the infinite variations that social agents are able to negotiate with a structure" (p. 43).

It is important for teachers to understand how deeply immigrant parents are committed to their children's education, even if communication is difficult or parents do not attend school-sponsored meetings or if the children are struggling academically. For example, this study revealed that teachers were frustrated at what they perceived as a lack of parent involvement in academics—an area which directly impacts school funding—while parents felt that they could best support the school by teaching their children respect and

allowing teachers to focus on academics. Until parent voices—not just their signatures on permission slips or presence at parent–teacher conferences—are prioritized and privileged in the school, it is impossible for teachers to understand the complexity of these parents’ experience, struggles, and commitment to their children. Understanding parents’ experiences is important because “how power is distributed between the school and family unit affects students’ adjustment and academic achievement” (Delgado Gaitan, 2014, p. 339). As Trumbull and Rothstein-Fisch (2011) point out, even the idea of achievement is culturally variable, and elementary teachers benefit when they are trained to recognize this variability using cultural frameworks such as individualism versus collectivism (see also Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Future research could examine teacher perspectives and include data from other schools. However, while data from other contexts is helpful and can illuminate recurring themes, school staff could ideally conduct their own interviews with parents in their own teaching contexts, and this study has provided an example of how to undertake such a project.

### **Limitations**

One anonymous reviewer mentioned that despite these parent concerns, these results seem out of touch with the tragic anti-immigrant spirit pervasive in Arizona. A few factors could account for what may seem like an overly positive outlook. One factor may be that, despite anti-immigrant public policies, parents at this particular school did not view the school as a site of anti-immigrant sentiments and weighed their children’s teachers’ actions and attitudes more heavily than those of the district board or wider community. Another factor could, of course, be that parents did not feel comfortable discussing these sentiments, if they felt them, perhaps because they were speaking with a White interviewer at the school site or even because they recognized that critical sentiments potentially conflicted with their sincere gratitude for other aspects of the school, such as the way their children were treated. It is also possible that parents with different backgrounds (such as differing documentation statuses or different lengths of time living in the U.S.) had varying levels of awareness of and experiences with very unfortunate institutional and public policies that promote discrimination and discourage linguistic diversity inside and outside the classroom. Finally, despite the invitation to articulate concerns, parents may not be used to an educational culture in which parents express discontents openly, as American parents are expected to do. In any case, it is important to note that parents did articulate very direct concerns.

## Conclusions

This study has shown how parents are not just invested in their children, but also aware of and appreciative of the work teachers are doing to help their children. Because teachers are under a lot of pressure to teach to standardized tests and are evaluated based on their students' performance, they may not be aware of the high respect parents have for the non-academic ways teachers care for and love their students. It is important that teachers understand this in order to decrease the gap between the high investment of parents and the (sometimes negative) ways teachers perceive parent investment. The truth is, parents who participated in this study are highly supportive of their children's school and teachers and would likely respond positively to clearly communicated suggestions from teachers about how to support children academically at home. Because many parents come to the school each day to pick up and drop off their children or to watch them play on the playground, the school staff could use these times of day to communicate with parents, and the administration could help them to do so. To address parent feedback, school staff could consider how certain school tasks could also be framed in terms of partnership and apprenticeship, rather than independent work that children are expected to complete on their own. In addition, the school administration could consider how to give increased voice and power to other school staff members (such as bus drivers, instructional assistants, and other support staff working with children), who may be unable to address bullying or other issues related to children's well-being due to being responsible for too many children or not having a voice in the school. Finally, school and district policy could consider ways it is possible to simultaneously promote English language learning and multilingualism, rather than resort to English-only policies at the expense of bilingual or heritage education.

Although inviting feedback puts schools in a vulnerable position because parents could raise issues staff were not expecting to address, initiating such a conversation marks the first step in a relationship. Only when parents feel they are heard by a trusted authority at the school can some of these concerns and fears be addressed. An ultimate goal is the equitable distribution of voice and power because, as Delgado Gaitan (2014) points out, "when parents and educators share power, meaningful change ensues" (p. 344). This is important because most teachers enter into education out of love for children, and they do not want parents to misinterpret or misunderstand their motives to provide a safe space for all children. Similarly, many parents have undergone tremendous sacrifice in order to give their children better lives, and it is important for schools to understand the depth of their commitment to their children's

futures. Inviting dialogue on these topics puts teachers and parents alike at a place of vulnerability—parents because they are sharing fears they do not know will be heard, and teachers because their hard work and good intentions may be criticized. But this place of vulnerability is exactly where productive, progressive dialogue can thrive.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Schools are classified as “high poverty” when 75%–100% of students qualify for free and reduced lunches (see National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010).

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol (English and Spanish)

### Questions for Parent Focus Groups—English

- When do you go to the school? How do you feel?  
Follow up: Who do you know who works at the school? Do you feel comfortable and welcome at this school? Why or why not? How can the schools make you feel more welcome? What types of information do you want to receive from the school?
- What do you teach your children at home that they do not learn at school? (This can be language, culture, skills, or anything else.)  
Follow up: Do you think that your kids use these skills and knowledge at school? Are their teachers aware that they have these skills?
- What is one of the favorite things you do with your children or as a family?  
Follow up: Share one positive memory you have with your child.
- What is one strength your child has? (This can be academic or related to character.) Can you list some responsibilities that they have at home?
- What concerns do you have as parents/family about the school your children attend? Why?  
Follow up: What do your children share with you about what they don't like?
- What do you like about the school your children attend? Why?  
Follow up: What are the strengths, surprises, or positive aspects of being in this school? What do your children share with you about what they like?
- Can you recommend any changes that the school could make in order to improve the quality of your experience with the school?
- How is this school similar or different to other schools your child has attended?
- What kind of contact and connection would you ideally want from the teachers and schools your children attend? Do you feel you want more contact? If so, what kind of contact and information do you want most from the schools? Under what conditions do you expect to be contacted?
- What do you want the teachers and administrators of the schools your children attend to know and understand about your expectations? What do you wish they would ask you about? Why?

### Questions for Parent Focus Groups—Spanish

- ¿Cuándo va Ud. a la escuela? ¿Cómo se siente cuando entra en la escuela?  
Follow up: ¿Quién conoce en la escuela? Se siente Ud. cómodo y bienvenido/a en la escuela? ¿Por qué o por qué no? ¿Qué tipo de información quisiera Usted recibir de la escuela? ¿Cómo preferiría recibir esta información?



- ¿Qué enseña Usted sus hijos afuera de la escuela? Puede ser lenguaje, cultura, destrezas u otras cosas. ¿Utilizan sus niños este conocimiento en la escuela? ¿Por qué o por qué no? ¿Saben los maestros que sus hijos tienen estas destrezas?
  - ¿Cuál es una cosa que le gusta mucho hacer con sus hijos o como familia? ¿Cuál es una memoria buena que comparten con su hijo?
  - ¿Cuál es una característica buena de su hijo o algo que su hijo hace muy bien? (Puede ser académico o relacionado con su carácter). ¿Cuáles deberes tienen sus niños en la casa?
  - ¿Qué dudas o preocupaciones tiene como padre acerca de la escuela que asisten sus hijos? ¿Por qué? ¿Hay algo que sus hijos les dicen a Ustedes que no les gusta acerca de la escuela?
  - ¿Qué creen que funciona bien en la escuela que sus hijos asisten? / ¿Qué les gusta en la escuela? ¿Por qué?
- Follow up: ¿Cuáles son las fuerzas, sorpresas, o los aspectos positivos de estar en esta escuela? ¿Hay algo que sus hijos les dicen que les gusta acerca de la escuela?
- ¿Podría decirnos algo que la escuela podría cambiar inmediatamente para mejorar la calidad de su experiencia con la escuela?
  - ¿Qué tipo de contacto o conexión quisiera tener con los maestros y escuelas de la escuela que asisten sus hijos? ¿Quisiera estar más en contacto con la escuela? ¿Qué tipo de información quisiera obtener de la escuela? ¿Bajo cuáles circunstancias esperan ser contactado?
- Follow up: Los maestros están trabajando desde un punto de vista cultural americana acerca de cómo, cuándo, y con qué frecuencia los padres quieren estar en contacto con las escuelas. ¿Entienden las expectativas de la escuela? ¿Cómo describiría su punto de vista cultural acerca de estar en contacto con las maestras y la escuela?
- ¿Qué quiere que los maestros y los administradores (o sea, la directora, la gente que se encarga de la escuela) sepan y entiendan acerca de sus expectativas? ¿Qué desean Ustedes que la escuela les preguntara? ¿Por qué?

